Rethinking performativity
A critical realist analysis of accounting for corporate social responsibility

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to advance a critical realist perspective on performativity and use it to examine how novel conceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) have performative effects.

Design/methodology/approach – To illustrate how the authors’ critical realist understanding of performativity can play out, the authors offer a field study of an Australian packaging company and engage in retroductive and retrodictive theorising.

Findings – In contrast to most prior accounting research, the authors advance a structuralist understanding of performativity that pays more systematic attention to the causal relationships that underpin performative tendencies. The authors explain how such tendencies are conditioned by pre-existing, social structures, conceptualised in terms of multiple, intersecting norm circles. The authors illustrate their argument empirically by showing how specific conceptions of CSR, centred on the notion of “shared value”, were cemented by the interplay between the causal powers embedded in such norm circles and how this suppressed alternative conceptions of this phenomenon.

Research limitations/implications – The findings draw attention to the structural boundary conditions under which particular conceptions of CSR can be expected to become performative. Greater attention to such boundary conditions, denoting the social structures that reinforce and counteract performative tendencies, is required to further cumulative, yet context-sensitive, theory development on this topic.

Originality/value – The paper is the first to adopt a critical realist perspective on performativity in the accounting literature. This perspective strikes a middle path between the highly constructivist ontology, adopted in most accounting research concerned with performativity and realist criticisms of this ontological position for de-emphasising the influence of pre-existing, objective realities on performativity.

Keywords Performativity, Corporate social responsibility, Accounting, Critical realism

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Accounting scholars have long recognised that accounting fills an important constitutive role in organisations and society (e.g. Burchell et al., 1980; Hopwood and Miller, 1994; Miller and Power, 2013). In recent years, much of this research has come to pivot on the so-called “performativity thesis”, which posits that accounting does not only reflect pre-existing, social realities, but that it can also play a powerful role in transforming the world such that it comes to resemble or deviate from the realities that accounting purports to represent (see Vosselman, 2014). More specifically, the performative capacity of accounting is often seen as residing in its ability to transform ideas and objects into calculable entities, which fuel more or less ongoing change processes. Whilst the notion of performativity has become a prominent feature in several strands of sociological thought (see Gond et al., 2016), accounting scholars have mostly followed one of those strands, informed by actor-network theory (e.g. Dambrin and Robson, 2011; Georg and Justesen, 2017; Mouritsen, 2006; Skærbæk and Tryggestad, 2010) and, to a lesser extent, the works of Judith Butler (e.g. McKinley, 2010; Revellino and Mouritsen, 2017). This research shares a strongly constructivist view of performativity which, in terms of ontology, assumes that accounting effectively creates “new” realities, but which pays much less attention to how performative
effects are conditioned by pre-existing, social structures. However, this view of performativity has recently attracted criticism for potentially over-emphasising the constitutive powers of accounting and detracting from a systematic theoretical understanding of how the structures in which it is embedded constrain as well as sustain performative effects (Modell et al., 2017; Yang and Modell, 2015).

This criticism mirrors that levied at much of the broader, sociological literature on performativity for paying insufficient attention to how pre-existing realities condition the possibilities of performativity (e.g. Brisset, 2016; Felin and Foss, 2009a, b; Fine, 2003; Slater, 2002). This has entailed explicit calls for ontological realism to establish clearer, theoretical boundary conditions for when performative effects may be expected to be more or less salient (Felin and Foss, 2009a, b). One way of introducing such realism is to advance a critical realist perspective on performativity. Critical realists recognise the possibilities of performativity whilst insisting that performative effects are always conditioned by extant realities such as those manifested in long-standing, social structures (Elder-Vass, 2008; Kaidesoja, 2013). Whilst this perspective has so far eluded research exploring the performativity of accounting, critical realism has recently started to inform a small, but growing, body of research that firmly situates the role of accounting in relation to the social structures in which it is embedded (see Modell, 2017a, b).

Adopting a critical realist perspective, we ask how pre-existing social structures condition the propensity of novel ideas to become performative and how accounting is implicated in bringing about such performativity. We address these questions through a field study of the use of accounting to render specific conceptions of corporate social responsibility (CSR), centred on the notion of “shared value” (Porter and Kramer, 2006, 2011), measurable and manageable in an Australian packaging company. In doing so, we pay particular attention to the assertion that scholarly knowledge claims can have performative effects (see Callon, 1998; MacKenzie, 2006, 2007), which has exercised considerable influence on contemporary accounting research (see Vosselman, 2014). Consistent with critical realism, we show that a broader range of pre-existing social structures, conceptualised in terms of intersecting norm circles (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012), condition the performativity of such knowledge claims and have a strongly stabilising influence on particular conceptions of CSR whilst suppressing alternative conceptions of this phenomenon. In comparison with much prior accounting research, this leads to a more structuralist understanding of performativity and enables us to identify the structural boundary conditions under which specific conceptions of CSR become performative. In doing so, we also pay more systematic attention to the causal relationships that underpin performative tendencies and the possibilities of cumulative, yet context-sensitive, theory development on this topic. We discuss the implications of adopting a critical realist approach for future research on performativity.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we outline our critical realist view of performativity. We then describe our empirical research setting and methods, before examining the evolution of CSR in our field study site and the role of accounting in this process. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and how our critical realist view of performativity may be extended in future research.

2. A critical realist view of performativity

Critical realism rests on an ontology that combines a moderately realist and a moderately social constructivist position (Elder-Vass, 2012) and places the enduring influence of social structures centre stage. Critical realists accept that human agents do not operate in a structural vacuum and that extant social structures typically exert a strong, but only partially observable, influence on the propensity for social change (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1986). They also make a strict distinction between the social structures that precede and
emerge from the exercise of human agency. Extant social structures are often deeply entrenched and imbued with causal powers, or the potential, to generate particular events with a certain degree of regularity. As human beings engage with such structures, some of their causal powers will be activated and these powers will subsequently reinforce or counteract each other, generating complex processes of structural reproduction or transformation (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1986). Whilst recognising the potential for social change, critical realists emphasise that extant structures often exercise an important, stabilising influence on social development because at least some causal powers have reasonably stable properties and therefore affect events with a certain degree of consistency and regularity (Bhaskar, 1975; Elder-Vass, 2010; Lawson, 1997). The ensuing regularities take the form of tendencies[1] in the occurrence of events, which are only negated in situations where agents engage with structures that have strong, countervailing powers.

One way of conceptualising how social structures are implicated in generating particular events and tendencies, which is increasingly used in critical realism (e.g. Archer and Elder-Vass, 2012; Blee, 2013; Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012, 2015a), is to conceive of such structures as multiple, interacting norm circles. According to Elder-Vass (2010), a norm circle represents a particular group of social actors held together by reified social norms regarding what constitutes appropriate actions and practices and sharing a collective intention to enforce such norms[2]. The norms that hold together a particular norm circle may be relatively abstract and perhaps not immediately observable, but they are imbued with the causal powers to compel individual human beings to pursue particular courses of action. The concept of norm circles has considerable affinity with objectified, social institutions that cause human beings to enact various norms (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2015a). As such enactment unfolds, the causal powers of the norms are activated, causing particular events and tendencies to occur. However, following the ontological assumptions of critical realism, the relationship between norm circles and the events generated by their causal powers is not deterministic. Rather, consistent with the view that social events are conditioned by several, interacting powers, individual human beings often engage with more than one norm circle and, in doing so, they activate their causal powers in such a way that the resulting events reflect multiple norms. Depending on their subjectively held beliefs, individuals are often disposed to enact norms originating in more than one norm circle. This brings about a certain degree of overlap, or intersectionality, between norm circles and leads the causal powers embedded in them to either reinforce or counteract each other (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2012). The actual occurrence of individual events and tendencies is thus contingent on a complex interplay between the subjective dispositions of individual human beings and the causal powers embedded in multiple norm circles[3].

The conception of the social world as constituted by multiple norm circles enables us to rethink notions of performativity, which have attracted ample attention in accounting research, along critical realist lines. Whilst the notion of performativity can be conceptualised in several ways (see Gond et al., 2016), accounting scholars have primarily subscribed to a view borrowed from social studies of science and technology that describes how especially economic theories become performative. Drawing on the works of Callon (1998) and MacKenzie (2006, 2007), several researchers have demonstrated how various accounting technologies, centred on specific calculative devices, have more or less direct, performative effects (e.g. Christensen and Skærøe, 2007; Cuckston, 2018; Georg and Justesen, 2017; Revellino and Mouritsen, 2015; Roberts and Jones, 2009; Skærøe and Tryggestad, 2010; Vinnari and Skærøe, 2014). According to MacKenzie (2006, 2007), such effects can either be relatively weak, or “generic”, as is the case where participants in economic processes merely use particular aspects of a theory, or can take stronger, or “effective”, forms insofar as the use of theories actually affects economic actions. The latter type of performativity can make economic processes similar to their depiction in economic
theories (“Barnesian” performativity), but it can also have the opposite effect and make economic processes less similar to such theories (counter-performativity). This conception of performativity is a useful starting point for examining the relative strength and direction of performative effects. However, to establish clearer boundary conditions for when performative effects may be expected to occur, researchers need to pay closer attention to how pre-existing social structures influence the propensity for performativity than has been the case in much accounting research (Brisset, 2016; Ferraro et al., 2005, 2009).

One way of establishing such structural boundary conditions is to conceive of scholarly knowledge claims as conditioned by multiple, intersecting norm circles. In extending the conception of norm circles, Elder-Vass (2012) discusses how scientific knowledge can be seen as a particular type of norm circle and how the knowledge claims that are sanctioned by such norm circles are imbued with causal powers. The causal powers of scholarly knowledge claims originate in the shared, social norms that govern the validity of such claims and that hold together a particular community of scholars and other users of scientific knowledge. However, Elder-Vass (2012) argues that scientific knowledge often intersects with other norm circles and that the interplay between the causal powers embedded in them either reinforces or counteracts the effects of scholarly knowledge claims. Hence, the relative strength and direction of performative effects are conditioned by multiple norm circles. This ontological position imbues research with a pronounced, structuralist understanding of the conditions under which performative effects are stabilised or negated. However, consistent with the ontological underpinnings of critical realism, the causal powers embedded in multiple norm circles may or may not be activated and cause scholarly knowledge claims to be performative depending on how individuals engage with various norm circles.

This revised, ontological conception of performativity compels us to trace performative effects back to the norm circles which surround various accounting technologies, rather than attributing performativity directly to the use of such technologies (cf. Modell et al., 2017; Yang and Modell, 2015). In addition to facilitating the specification of structural boundary conditions, this answers emerging calls for retaining a strong focus on scientific knowledge as the root cause of performativity to preserve the distinctiveness of the term (Boldyrev and Svetlova, 2016). Our critical realist conception of performativity (see Figure 1) starts from the assumption that performativity originates in scientific knowledge as a distinct norm circle, the norms of which interact with those of other norm circles. By probing into how human beings engage with these norm circles and cause them to intersect, we explore how the causal powers embedded in them reinforce and counteract performative tendencies. Such tendencies denote the propensity of scholarly knowledge claims to be enacted and reproduced by human beings with a certain degree of consistency and regularity. Accounting technologies play a

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**Figure 1.**
A critical realist conception of performativity

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potentially important role in reinforcing performative tendencies and channelling the activation of causal powers into particular courses of action. Where such tendencies take the strong, or “effective”, form of performativity postulated by MacKenzie (2006, 2007), we may expect new patterns of action to be stabilised over time. Following MacKenzie (2006, 2007), we also recognise that performative tendencies can be of the “Barnesian” as well as the counter-performative kind.

The ontological foundations of critical realism described above have important epistemological and methodological implications. Whilst recognising the inherent open-endedness of all social research, critical realists place particular emphasis on the need for research to be theoretically informed (see e.g. Bhaskar, 1975; Elder-Vass, 2010; Lawson, 1997). Critical realists are highly sceptical of empiricist accounts, such as those found in purely inductive research, due to their ontological conception of reality as at least partly independent of knowing subjects and the concomitant, epistemological assumption that researchers’ empirical observations rarely reflect more than a sub-set of the complex interplay between the causal powers that underpin specific events and tendencies. Regardless of how exhaustive empirical observations are, it is fallacious to equate such observations with statements about how the underlying causal powers might work (Bhaskar, 1975; Kaidesoja, 2013). This creates a need to combine context-sensitive, empirical inquiries with abstract theorising, that goes beyond what is immediately observable, to map out the causal powers that are potentially relevant for explaining particular tendencies (see e.g. Elder-Vass, 2010, 2015b; Lawson, 1997; Modell, 2015; Tsoukas, 1989). Such delineations of causal powers enable researchers to build on extant theoretical knowledge to establish the boundary conditions under which certain explanations are likely to hold. This can form a basis for cumulative theory development regarding how scholarly knowledge claims become performative. However, although critical realists insist that some tendencies may repeat themselves across different instances of space and time, they recognise that empirical observations are always under-determined by social realities and, therefore, fallible (Bhaskar, 1975, 1986). Hence, any attempts to generalise the workings of causal powers must be seen as open to refutation or revision (Lawson, 1997; Tsang and Kwan, 1999).

The concrete methodological procedures through which abstract theorising and context-sensitive empirical analyses are brought together in critical realist inquiries are encapsulated in the twin concepts of retroduction and retrodiction (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2015b; Lawson, 1997; Modell, 2017a, b). Retroduction is the process of developing theoretically informed conjectures about which individual causal powers might bear on the events and tendencies that researchers are seeking to explain. Since these causal powers may not be immediately observable, retroduction entails an element of abstraction from the events and tendencies that emerge in specific, empirical contexts. However, it differs from purely theoretical, or hypothetico-deductive, modelling in starting from the specific, empirically observable events and tendencies that researchers are trying to explain. As such, retroduction is often embedded in ongoing processes of identifying possible causal powers that may influence emerging, empirical observations. Retrodiction, in contrast, denotes the process of assessing how different causal powers are actually activated and how the interplay between such powers gives rise to particular tendencies in specific, empirical contexts. Retrodiction is a necessary, first step for such analyses in providing the analytical building blocks for retroduction. However, it is only by retrodicting how norm circles intersect that deeper empirical insights into the activation of causal powers may be derived (Elder-Vass, 2010, 2015b). Following the view of performativity outlined above, we initiate our empirical analysis by retrodicting which norm circles might influence the tendencies we are seeking to explain. Then, we use a retrodictive analysis to examine the actual activation of the causal powers embedded in these norm circles and how the interplay between these powers reinforced and counteracted performative tendencies over time.
3. Research setting and methods
To illustrate how our critical realist understanding of performativity can play out, we offer a field study of a privately owned Australian packaging manufacturer called Bravado[4], which, at the time of our study, was in the process of implementing a series of CSR initiatives. As a relatively new idea, increasingly diffusing across a range of industries, evolving theoretical conceptions of CSR may be expected to have performative effects that become manifest in the use of accounting technologies (Gond and Nyberg, 2017; Ligonie, 2018). The notion of CSR is also surrounded by a range of social structures, which have contributed to its institutionalisation (Archel et al., 2011; Brammer et al., 2012; Campbell, 2007) and, therefore, it constitutes a useful focal point for an analysis of how its performative effects are conditioned by such structures. However, the concept of CSR is made up of a range of rather loosely connected concerns, such as reduction of environmental pollution and resource usage and improvements in staff well-being and satisfaction, that may sometimes be contradictory (Gond and Nyberg, 2017; Roberts, 2003). We seek to unpack the context-specific meanings of CSR and explain its trajectory in Bravado through our retroductive and retrodictive analyses.

At the time of our study, Bravado had undergone a period of rapid growth. Between the formation of the company in 2002 and the start of our study in 2007, annual sales grew from approximately $400m to $800m, mainly as a result of an aggressive strategy of acquiring competitors. In 2007, Bravado employed about 1,600 people and operated across 23 sites in Australia and New Zealand. The company’s growth strategy was accompanied by concerted efforts to turn around the newly acquired subsidiaries to make them profitable and more financially accountable than previously. Bravado’s history as an independent company began when the “failing arm” of its parent company was sold to one of its general managers, who subsequently became the Chairman of the company, in a leveraged buy-out. The primary role of the Chairman was to develop Bravado’s vision and high-level strategy, but he also took an active part in the running of the company. On the operations side, Bravado had four separate product divisions – steel, rigid plastics, closures/caps and foam – headed by a General Manager who reported directly to both the Chairman and the Chief Executive Officer. Each division had a number of manufacturing sites, each with a site manager, and a national sales manager who reported directly to the General Manager. The management of CSR-related issues was largely delegated to an Environmental Responsibility Manager (ERM) and a Social Responsibility Manager (SRM), who both reported directly to the Chairman. Each production site also had Environmental Safety and Quality managers, who were responsible for maintaining and implementing the quality, environmental, safety and health management system.

The data collection in Bravado mainly took place over a 13-month period in 2007 and 2008 and was followed by a smaller number of follow-up interviews over the next six years. The data collection was both of a retrospective and real-time nature, which enabled us to map the historical development of Bravado’s control practices and follow a chain of events that challenged but ultimately failed to alter the emerging conception of CSR. Data collection mainly relied on semi-structured interviews but also included field observations and archival data. In the early phases of the field work, the primary researcher conducted a series of interviews with senior and middle managers to delve into the company’s use of an environmental scorecard and other accounting systems, which had a significant influence on managers’ understanding of CSR. As the field work progressed, the researcher also explored the emergence of two social surveys that produced events that ran counter to this understanding of CSR. The design and results of the surveys formed the basis for interviews with middle and lower-level managers as well as with line supervisors and was followed by a series of follow-up interviews with the SRM after the main part of the data collection was completed to probe the long-term consequences of the social surveys. In total,
41 interviews were conducted over the duration of the field work (see Table AI). All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim and the transcripts were initially coded in NVivo to facilitate our more theoretically informed analysis. The interviews were complemented with observations of management meetings, undertaken during the main period of data collection, and tours were taken of the factory floor wherein the researcher noted relevant environmental management procedures. In addition to the environmental scorecard a collection of other documents, such as weekly scorecards, audit programmes, operating procedures, budgets and production plans, also broadened our understanding of Bravado’s pursuit of CSR and the context in which it evolved.

Whilst the interviews were relatively open-ended, they included several questions that enabled us to explore the influence of a broad range of social actors, who might be expected to constitute various norm circles, on Bravado’s control practices[5]. As recommended by critical realist writers (e.g. Lawson, 1997; Tsoukas, 1989), we strove to maintain this open-endedness throughout the research process whilst continuously contrasting the data with diverse theoretical interpretations solicited from the accounting and broader CSR literatures. This facilitated our retroductive analysis, aimed at identifying norm circles that might bear on the tendencies we are seeking to explain. Our retroductive analysis was complemented with interviews with all participants to assess the relevance of including specific norm circles in our analysis and to specify the norms that prima facie seemed to affect these tendencies. Although we did not interact directly with the social actors constituting the norm circles under investigation, this provided a reasonably good understanding of the norms being conveyed by these norm circles and affecting the events observed in Bravado. Our subsequent, retrodictive analysis then offers deeper insights into the processes through which key agents (especially the Chairman and the SRM), with different subjective dispositions concerning CSR, engaged with various norm circles, how this led the causal powers of these norm circles to be activated and how these powers reinforced or counteracted each other. Throughout the research process, the primary researcher had close personal contacts with especially the SRM but, despite several attempts to approach the Chairman, he failed to secure direct access to him. Whilst this creates certain limitations insofar as inferring the Chairman’s subjective dispositions, other managers provided rich and largely unanimous accounts of what drove his approach to CSR and caused him to take certain courses of action.

4. Field study findings
4.1 Bravado’s overriding control practices
Bravado’s pursuit of various CSR initiatives was closely related to a set of management control practices, which placed a strong emphasis on supporting the company’s growth strategy and promoting financial accountability. In order to align the newly acquired subsidiaries with his strategic vision, the Chairman (and owner) of the company developed a set of “Big Goals”, which were to be the focus of operations across all of Bravado’s sites for the period of 2006–2009. These “Big Goals” were specified as follows:

(1) make Bravado a successful $1bn turnover company; and

(2) reduce the environmental footprint of Bravado.

To translate the “Big Goal” of “reducing the environmental footprint of Bravado” into concrete actions, Bravado developed an environmental policy outlining a set of principles that defined its approach to CSR. Bravado’s stakeholders were acknowledged in this environmental policy, which was divided into a number of different initiatives: communicating and consulting with the community; complying with environmental laws and regulations; and identifying and reducing environmental impacts through continuous
These initiatives were pursued alongside the Chairman’s overriding ambition to restore and enhance the financial performance of Bravado. A weekly scorecard reporting system was implemented to put pressure on managers to “revive” their businesses and restore their profitability. The weekly scorecard, which entailed a rolling set of detailed targets, contained each site’s performance across a number of key areas, such as net profit, net margin as a percentage of sales, overhead costs, sales per full time employee, waste production expressed as a percentage of production, and waste as an absolute value. Site performance was also assessed in relation to monthly and year-to-date targets. In order to assess the performance of Bravado as a whole, information from the weekly scorecards was consolidated into company-wide scorecards once a month. This company-wide scorecard was used to obtain a broader understanding of Bravado’s performance as well as for higher-level strategic decision making. Producing this larger set of performance information was also intended to give the operating-level sites a more detailed view of their own performance. These control practices fostered a highly numbers-orientated and aggressive performance management ethos in Bravado. Referring to the conference calls accompanying the weekly scorecard reporting, one accountant remarked:

In these conference calls, I refer to them as “the public humiliation”, if things are going badly, then that’s what everyone focused on. They got fairly vocal and brutal at times. In fact, it had many of us in tears at times. If the Chairman joined in, it was a good time for head kicking […] that was the Bravado way. (Interview, Management Accountant, 26 February 2008)

The ensuing analysis explores the performative tendencies associated with the more specific, CSR-related accounting technologies, which evolved within these broader efforts to restore the financial viability of Bravado. We start by describing the tendencies associated with the most important technology – the environmental scorecard – and offer a retroductive account of which norm circles might be responsible for these tendencies. This is followed by two retrodictive analyses, which seek to explain how particular conceptions of CSR became performative and how these performative tendencies evolved over time.

4.2 Retroductive analysis of the tendencies associated with the environmental scorecard

The environmental scorecard was first developed in 2003. Although this accounting technology operated separately from the weekly scorecard, it was designed to mimic the latter and achieve the “Big Goal” of “reducing the environmental footprint of Bravado” whilst compelling managers to identify opportunities for cost savings. Around the same time that the environmental scorecard was introduced, the Chairman started to arrange annual meetings where he communicated general expectations in terms of emission reductions and efficiency improvement targets for each division. After the annual meetings, these targets were transformed into site-level targets, which either focussed on reducing environmentally detrimental inputs and outputs or on systems compliance. Input and output targets represented significant costs in the manufacturing process. In terms of production inputs, the scorecard measured the use of electricity, natural gas, liquid petroleum gas, water and diesel per unit of production. As a key indicator of production outputs, the scorecard used waste to landfill per unit of production. By focussing on the overall reduction in the use of resources, the environmental scorecard was intended to encourage the site managers to devise their own action plans to achieve cost savings. All environmental process improvements needed to meet a three- to five-year payback criterion and the environmental scorecard targets were built into the individual performance objectives of all site-level managers and were reviewed as part of their bi-annual performance reviews.

From 2006, information originating in the environmental scorecard was incorporated into site newsletters, which were made available to staff and e-mailed to Bravado’s
customers. The printed version of the newsletters was made available in the foyers of the sites to convey the message that Bravado was an environmentally responsible company. From 2006, each site was also given a rating ranging from AAA to C, which rendered the environmental performance of the sites comparable, and the environmental performance of all sites was then published in their individual newsletters “for all to see”[6]. By making the sites’ environmental performance visible in this manner, the scorecard created competition between sites whilst ensuring that environmental performance improvements were translated into cost savings. One site manager explained:

It’s a bit of a “management by shaming” system really, where you can see how you’re going compared to [site X] or [site Y] – I’ll tell ya it’s effective in raising the bar. (Interview, Site manager, 16 February 2007)

Hence, the use of the environmental scorecard was associated with a pronounced tendency among Bravado’s managers to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance. Through our initial, retroductive analysis, we identify two potentially relevant norm circles, labelled normative management knowledge and customer demands with the causal powers to reinforce this tendency. The first of these norm circles is centred on scholarly knowledge claims, which can have performative effects, and thus represents our conception of scientific knowledge as a specific type of norm circle. We also include a third norm circle, labelled labour rights, with the causal power to counteract the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance. In what follows, we examine each of the three norm circles in some detail. However, consistent with the view of critical realist inquiries as under-determined by social realities (Bhaskar, 1975, 1986), we wish to emphasise that these are only some of the norm circles that could potentially influence the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance.

**Normative management knowledge.** Starting with the question of which forms of scientific knowledge might be responsible for the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance, such knowledge is readily available in the form of concepts such as “shared value” creation. This concept was originally advanced by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011) and is arguably one of the foremost examples of contemporary academic research on CSR being reified into normative management knowledge (Dembek et al., 2016). Porter and Kramer’s (2006, 2011) version of “shared value” creation is based on the idea that corporations can generate environmental and social benefits whilst simultaneously creating competitive advantages and that, in doing so, they can create a “win-win” situation for their stakeholders (Crane et al., 2014). Building on Porter’s (1985) seminal work, Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011) positioned the notion of “shared value” in opposition to narrow, compliance-orientated conceptions of CSR and urged companies to take a more holistic view of how broader, societal concerns, including both environmental and social performance aspects, may be translated into competitive advantages. At the time of our study, this norm was increasingly being enacted by managers of large corporations who, together with influential academics, can be said to share a collective intention to enforce it (see Beschorner, 2014; Crane et al., 2014; Dembek et al., 2016). At Bravado, we witnessed managers mobilising discourses resonating with this norm, suggesting that the notion of “shared value” creation formed the basis for a distinct norm circle with the causal power to reinforce the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance. As demonstrated by Ligonie (2018), this concept can have powerful, performative effects, which are channelled into organisational action through the use of novel performance measures and may help to overcome barriers to connecting CSR initiatives to the pursuit of financial performance. Prior research has also shown how environmental scorecards, similar to that used in Bravado, can help companies to integrate environmental concerns into their control practices (e.g. Butler et al., 2011; Epstein and Wisner, 2001; Figge et al., 2002; Hansen and Schaltegger, 2016; Länsiluoto and Järvenpää, 2008).
However, in order to explain how notions of “shared value” gain traction in organisations, it is important to consider which other norm circles might reinforce such tendencies.

**Customer demands.** Whilst the notion of CSR entails a need for firms to engage with a broad range of social actors, contemporary corporations arguably tend to, at least rhetorically, prioritise the demands of customers over other stakeholders (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992; Ogden, 1997; Boyce, 2000). This propensity to favour customer demands, or what Du Gay and Salaman (1992, p. 615) call the “cult of the customer”, can be linked to the reification of the norm that firms should prioritise such demands to reinforce their position in increasingly competitive markets. In the context of CSR, this norm is often manifest in managerial enactment of the idea that the pursuit of environmental performance improvements in collaboration with customers should bolster the competitive position of firms and, ultimately, enhance their financial performance (Hart and Ahuja, 1996; Klassen and McLaughlin, 1996). Insofar as customers share a collective intention to enforce this norm, we may conceive of customer demands as a norm circle with the causal power to reinforce the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance. The relevance of doing so in our case is underscored by the observation that Bravado was heavily dependent on a group of around 20 large customers, accounting for 90 per cent of its sales. Several managers in Bravado, such as the general managers, sales managers and site managers, had direct contacts with these customers. Interviews with these individuals revealed an intimate knowledge and prioritising of customer demands and suggested that the customers consistently expressed the view that, by operating in an environmentally sustainable supply chain, they could not only strengthen their competitive position but also bestow legitimacy gains on all parties involved. The customers collectively enforced this norm on Bravado by requiring it to disclose information derived from its environmental scorecard, which was then included in their stakeholder reports. Prior accounting research also suggests that the norms of powerful customers can influence the development of performance measures, such as those included in environmental scorecards (see, e.g. Arjaliès and Mundy, 2013; Figge et al., 2002; Rodrigue et al., 2013; Spence and Rinaldi, 2014). For instance, Figge et al. (2002) argue that such measures can generate a focus on “environmental customers” and their profitability, satisfaction, retention and market share and thus help firms to translate environmental performance improvements into financial benefits. Hence, it is reasonable to conceive of environmental scorecards as an accounting technology that may channel the causal powers of customer demands into conceptions of CSR such as that dominating Bravado. However, it is less clear whether customer demands also have the causal power to enhance the emphasis on the broader, social aspects of CSR and thus buttress conceptions of this phenomenon that come closer to Porter and Kramer’s (2006, 2011) holistic, theoretical ideal for “shared value” creation.

**Labour rights.** Whilst the discussion above has focused on a managerialist conception of CSR as a vehicle for bestowing economic benefits on corporations, there have been repeated calls for greater attention to the broader, social dimensions of this concept (e.g. Gray and Gray, 2011; Lee, 2008; O’Dwyer and Unerman, 2016). As a reified norm, this alternative view of CSR is grounded in a relatively radical change agenda aimed at generating social benefits for a broad range of stakeholders (Spence, 2007, 2009; Thomson and Bebbington, 2005), which can challenge corporate elites and empower disenfranchised stakeholders (Spence, 2007). A concrete manifestation of such norms forming the basis for a distinct norm circle is the one pivoting on labour rights. The key social actors constituting this norm circle are trade unions and workers sharing a collective intention to safeguard and enhance such rights whilst often harbouring a critical view of managerial CSR initiatives as an indirect means of work intensifications (Jones et al., 2007; Preuss et al., 2006). The relevance of including this norm circle in our analysis is underscored by the observation that the main
Trade unions were critical of Bravado’s environmentally focused CSR agenda. This criticism was not overtly communicated to senior management. However, the union members posted stickers, saying “proud to be union”, “secure safe jobs”, “working for a better future” and “we defend your rights”, and featuring the Eureka Stockade flag, as well as signs calling for labour rights to be taken seriously in common areas away from the direct gaze of management. This attempt to subtly enforce norms that did not pivot on managerialist concerns with improving profitability suggests that the norm circle pivoting on labour rights may be imbued with the causal power to counteract the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance. However, prior research provides mixed evidence as to whether specific groups of workers enact critical views of managerial CSR initiatives. Whilst this has been found to be the case among especially blue-collar workers (De Neve, 2014), it seems to be less pronounced among white-collar workers who identify with their employers to a greater extent (Rodrigo and Arenas, 2008). Similarly, prior accounting research provides conflicting evidence as to whether labour rights truly matter in the context of CSR or whether a more managerialist view of staff-related concerns prevails. Whilst some researchers explore the development of staff-related metrics and suggest that managers do take such concerns seriously (Epstein and Wisner, 2001; von Geibler et al., 2006), others argue that this does not necessarily lead to a stronger commitment to labour rights (Cooper et al., 2011) and that such initiatives are outweighed by customer demands (Dey, 2007). This suggests that the causal powers of labour rights are not always activated or that they are counteracted by the causal powers of other norm circles.

4.3 First retrodictive analysis: explaining the emergence of performative tendencies

The following retrodictive analysis is centred on how the Chairman, as the key agent behind the use of the environmental scorecard, engaged with the norm circles identified above and how the subsequent intersectionality between these norm circles contributed to the tendency among managers to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance. Judging from our interviews, the Chairman seemed to value environmental conservation and harboured genuine concerns about climate change. Several interviewees pointed to how these subjective dispositions were translated into passionate attempts to put environmental issues on the agenda. As one production manager noted:

("The inconvenient truth" had come out. You know the Gore doco. He [the Chairman] was running around like a headless chook. “What are we doing? What are we doing about it? I don’t wanna be responsible. I don’t want my kids having to live with these problems we created". (Interview, Production manager, 26 February 2008)

However, it is important to note that the Chairman’s concerns with environmental issues were tempered by his strong disposition to conceive of such concerns as a business issue and this confined them to ways that drove profits. This disposition became manifest in the changes to the main goals of the company, whereby the Chairman elevated the reduction of Bravado’s environmental footprint to a key, strategic objective whilst insisting that any environmental performance improvement initiative needed to be translated into cost savings.

The Chairman’s interest in environmental performance improvements was mirrored by the norms being reflected in the demands of Bravado’s major customers. The Chairman was alerted to these demands at quarterly sales meetings, where the customers often outlined their interest in Bravado’s commitment to CSR as well as requesting evidence that it was a “socially responsible” company that could support their own stakeholder reporting. Echoing the norm that meeting customer demands is imperative for securing the competitiveness of the firm (Du Gay and Salaman, 1992), the Chairman relayed these demands internally to emphasise the importance of meeting environmental performance
targets. In meetings with senior management, he would often quote the customers to justify his own vision of CSR:

The Chairman would always refer to his customer needs – [he would say] “look, look, X, Y and Z want us to demonstrate that we have increased our efforts to improve product design and reduce our carbon emissions – so it’s not just me this is the way we are heading so you better get on board”. (Interview, Foam Sales Manager, 16 February 2007)

Thus, there is evidence to suggest that the Chairman’s subjective dispositions led him to enact the norm that customer demands for environmental performance improvements ought to be a leitmotif for Bravado’s pursuit of CSR, and that this, in turn, activated the causal power of this norm circle to elevate environmental performance aspects within the company. Among Bravado’s managers, there was a growing sense that meeting such demands was imperative and that the company could learn important lessons from “keeping up” with the customers:

[The customers] are ahead of us in almost every way […] The Chairman sees them as an ideal or something. I tend to think we are pretty good for a small guy, but he is constantly saying [customer X] is doing this or [customer Y] is doing that – WOW isn’t that good! We should be doing that too. Of course, we don’t really have the resources to keep up with the big guys. But I think we do well considering. (Interview, General Manager Rigid Plastics, 15 February 2007)

However, on its own, the enactment of norms that were collectively enforced by Bravado’s customers does not explain why CSR initiatives, aimed at improving the company’s environmental performance, were equated with enhanced financial performance and how such ideas became performative. As far as we are aware, the customers never insisted that Bravado’s conception of CSR should take this specific form. To explain how the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance gained traction, it is necessary to consider how the causal powers embedded in normative management knowledge were activated.

Whilst the Chairman had started to use the environmental scorecard to communicate the importance of translating environmental performance improvements into cost savings a few years prior to our study, there was ample evidence of normative management knowledge, based on the notion of “shared value” (Porter and Kramer, 2006, 2011), reinforcing this message and contributing to overcoming managerial resistance to change. At the outset of our study, the Chairman had recently begun to rehearse the “shared value” discourse, which he had reportedly “got from [reading] the Harvard [Business] Review”[8], to rationalise the importance of environmental responsibility to the hard-nosed, financially focussed managers who were described as traditional “manufacturing types” with little regard for the environment. At first, the Chairman’s passionate and environmentally responsible approach was not valued by the managers, who saw it as “inspirational management gobbledygook” or “green non-sense”[9], and this created a level of distrust:

We thought – here is another 21st century entrepreneur trying to save the planet – we thought he would give up on the green stuff in a year or two when he realised what was really important in the [packaging] business. (Interview, General Manager of Procurement and Logistics, 15 February 2007)

This distrust prevailed for some time despite the introduction of the environmental scorecard, but gradually dissipated as the Chairman started to mobilise the idea of “shared value” creation. Several managers emphasised that the Chairman’s repeated references to this idea made his emphasis on environmental performance improvements persuasive. Two of them drew attention to how this compelled them to enact and reproduce the norms epitomised by the notion of “shared value” creation:

Well the Chairman didn’t exactly have a copy of the Harvard [Business] Review on his desk which he would cite like the bible or something. But I know he liked Michael Porter and other management
gurus like Porter. Sometimes he'd come into work all full of it – and you were like “sh*t what has he been reading this time” […] He would talk about these ideas in strategy meetings […] sometimes they became how we all had to speak. (Interview, Environmental Responsibility Manager, 12 February 2007)

[The Chairman] has made it clear that as an organisation we are unashamedly trying to make money, it’s something we will always be focused on. However, we can make money through environmentally detrimental actions, or by reducing costs and emissions. I don't think we would see making money and reducing environmental impacts as mutually exclusive and I like to think we are very much pursuing […] the space where we are achieving both. (Interview, Site Manager, 16 February 2007)

These findings are indicative of how the causal powers of normative management knowledge, pivoting on the idea of “shared value” creation, were activated and how such knowledge began to be performative. Similar to Ligonie (2018), we observed how the normative appeal of the “shared value” discourse became an important catalyst for organisational action. Although the managers already had a strong, subjective disposition to prioritise financial performance, this discourse led them to disassociate the need for environmental performance improvements from seemingly irrelevant, “hippie” issues and connect it to their day-to-day concerns with cost savings. Reflecting on how this compelled them to put the idea of “shared value” creation into action, one manager recalled:

I remember – it might have happened over a period of six months or so […] but the environment slowly became something […] It was talked about in production meetings – how could we reduce waste here and there. I think once we saw it in dollars it made sense and not whales and dolphins [laughs]. Hippie environmental stuff I mean [laughs]… We started making changes to the scrap processes, and line-timing so that the machines weren’t running when they weren’t used. The guys on the line got involved, that’s when we made the real improvements. (Interview, Production Manager, 21 February 2008)

Hence, the performativity of the idea of “shared value” creation gradually went from the weak, “generic” kind, as it was mainly used discursively by the Chairman in an attempt to overcome managerial resistance, to the stronger, “effective” form (MacKenzie, 2006, 2007). Throughout our field work, we saw managers increasingly taking concrete, operating-level actions that conformed to this idea. Examples of such actions included better line-timing to decrease idle machine time and material use and product redesign to increase the use of recyclable material and reduce water, energy and gas usage. Also, environmental costs were included in capital budgeting decisions when purchasing plant equipment. The Chairman went to significant lengths to reinforce this tendency in his day-to-day interactions with managers:

There’s money in this [points to barrel of scrap plastic] […] it’s just rubbish really but we have found a way to feed ourselves on it. I mean we can now make money from it. We send it back in over there and it mixes with virgin [new material input] […] Whenever he pops down, [The Chairman] always says don’t forget what we are doing here. This is an environmental positive as well […] We are reducing waste to landfill and our material costs. (Interview on factory floor, Site Manager, 22 February 2008)

These findings suggest that the idea of “shared value” creation had performative effects that caused managerial actions to, at least partly, resemble those depicted by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011) and approach the “Barnesian” type of performativity (MacKenzie, 2006, 2007). Similar to Ligonie (2018), we observed how this idea helped to transform an organisational context, that was initially adverse to CSR initiatives, into a more felicitous environment for such initiatives. The “shared value” discourse mobilised by the Chairman was instrumental in overcoming managerial resistance to such initiatives and thus seems to have made a distinct difference in generating performative tendencies. As noted earlier, the specific impetus for translating environmental performance improvements into enhanced
financial performance did not originate from Bravado’s customers. However, the causal powers embedded in customer demands clearly buttressed the performative tendencies emerging from the “shared value” discourse. Making normative references to the closely affiliated notion of creating a “win-win” situation, the Chairman sought to persuade managers that environmental performance improvements should raise the company’s profile in the eyes of its customers whilst also being used as a vehicle for enhancing financial performance. One manager drew attention to how the Chairman made explicit references to customer demands to compel managers to enact this norm:

In a sense, these big guys [pointing to sheet of largest customers] want the same thing we want, well, same thing the Chairman wants. He [the Chairman] has been really trying to push the whole win-win thing. It has really justified it for the Chairman. He isn’t exactly walking around saying “I told you so” – he loves rubbing it in his own way, ha, ha, ha! That’s what we all need – more bloody confirmation of this stuff – ha, ha, ha – I’m kidding. But honestly, he’s been harping on win-win stuff and now that customers are coming back with it – it’s really locked it in. (Interview, Production Manager, 26 February 2008)

These findings show how customer demands and normative management knowledge began to intersect and how this reinforced the performativity of “shared value” creation as a norm for the pursuit of CSR. However, it is worth recalling that the Chairman’s mobilisation of this norm represented a relatively narrow understanding of “shared value”, which was devoid of concerns with the broader, social aspects emphasised by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011). At the outset of our study, customer demands were confined to the reporting of environmental performance information. Hence, the causal powers of this norm circle did not only buttress the idea of “shared value” creation, but also reinforced a counter-performative tendency that turned the emerging conception of CSR into a partial manifestation of Porter and Kramer’s (2006, 2011) holistic ideal. There was initially little evidence of other norm circles, such as labour rights, intersecting with customer demands or normative management knowledge and counteracting this tendency. An important reason for this was the pervasive belief that there was money to be made by improving Bravado’s environmental performance. As managers increasingly enacted this norm, a clear hierarchy of priorities emerged:

[The Chairman] has made it clear that we are most importantly I think we are striving to reduce our impacts, on the environment, you know reducing carbon emissions, electricity, etc as this is what has economic benefit for us. Then, I think it’s about assuring the regulators that we are not operating with any excessive risks. Lastly, there needs to be a discussion with certain helpful elements of the community such as our staff. But really our focus, as a business is on reducing impacts, that’s where the value is. (Interview, General Manager of Foam, 13 February 2007)

The absence of staff-related performance aspects in the environmental scorecard also meant that there was initially a lack of powerful accounting technologies with the capacity to channel competing norms into alternative conceptions of CSR in Bravado. In contrast, the close link between the scorecard and the idea of “shared value” creation was instrumental in channelling key elements of the latter into managerial actions. The Chairman exploited this complementarity and the managers’ inherent inclination to focus on accounting numbers to reinforce the growing sense of responsibility for Bravado’s environmental performance. Although the initial introduction of the environmental scorecard was not sufficient to eliminate managerial resistance, several managers appreciated the fact that it connected environmental performance aspects to financial concerns and made them actionable. Two of them reflected on how this reinforced their enactment of the norm for “shared value” creation being promoted in Bravado:

Without that financial benefit [associated with the environmental scorecard] I guess there may not be the same drive […] How do we actually make money, whether that’s through growing sales, or reducing costs and emissions? I don’t think we would see either of them as mutually exclusive […]
but they both come about through the same [holds up scorecard document] you know numbers. It’s about accountability and achieving targets – whether it’s [environmental] or profit [it] doesn’t matter. (Interview, Production Manager, 28 February 2008)

These numbers [holding up environmental scorecard] don’t lie and I like their story, and I like what we’re trying to achieve. So it makes it much easier to engage in what you do and gives you some comfort about what you’re doing, you’re not just […] I don’t feel like I’m misrepresenting myself. It’s important. It’s the right thing to do so I can make a change and a difference […] The [environmental] scorecard shows, it’s sort of proof. There’s money in what we are doing here [points to environmental scorecard]. Profit and responsibility aren’t separate – you can do both – together. The power of the benefits is very real. (Interview, Site Manager E, 26 February 2008)

These findings are indicative of how performative tendencies, originating in normative management knowledge, were amplified by the environmental scorecard. As illustrated next, however, these tendencies were not immune to challenges from other norm circles that defied the emerging conception of CSR in Bravado.

4.4 Second retrodictive analysis: explaining the stabilisation of performative tendencies

Our second retrodictive analysis pivots on the distribution of two social surveys, aimed at measuring staff attitudes, in response to changing customer demands in favour of a somewhat broader conception of CSR in January 2007 and 2008. The surveys were distributed to all operating-level staff at the foreman level and below and both received an 80 per cent response rate. The changing customer demands did not signify any radical shift in collective intentionality away from their normative view of CSR as a vehicle for improved competitiveness. The customers merely requested Bravado to complement its disclosure of environmental performance information with some social performance aspects, which they could use for their own stakeholder reports, but did not insist that this should take the specific form of greater attention to staff-related concerns. Nevertheless, as explicated below, these changes triggered a development whereby labour rights temporarily became more salient as a norm circle.

Consistent with his disposition to enact the norms enforced by customers, the Chairman reportedly believed that responding to their requests would improve the level of trust and secure healthy, long-term customer relationships. His continued engagement with customer demands can thus be said to have activated the causal power of this norm circle to broaden the conception of CSR. However, the Chairman recognised his limitations when it came to managing these broader aspects of CSR and this contributed to his decision to hire the SRM, who had recently graduated with a university degree in human resource management and had a particular interest in staff and workplace issues. The SRM explained:

[The Chairman] was good at reducing [environmental] impacts – in fact he was the best. The concern of our customers was that he had not considered the social aspect of CSR or measured the business’s performance in relation to it. To his credit he knew this and wanted to fix it. That’s why he employed me as someone who could understand the social problems, measure them, understand and address them. (Interview, SRM, 19 February 2008)

The SRM’s subjective dispositions were very different from those of the Chairman and were manifest in a rather different understanding of CSR. Rather than being steeped in a business environment, governed by the primacy of prioritising financial performance aspects, she believed that broader stakeholder participation was at the heart of CSR and that a wider range of weak and silent voices ought to be heard. These beliefs were shaped by her experience as a recent university graduate. At university, she was an activist for refugee rights, but admitted to feeling somewhat “hypocritical” in this role as she was simultaneously completing a business degree, which was perceived by more radical activists as “selling out”. A similar sense of tension came to permeate her work in Bravado,
where she admitted to being seen as more idealistic than practical by her more experienced, business-minded colleagues:

Sometimes it slips out – that they see me as idealistic and naive in relation to my view of CSR – being sort of staff/people oriented. I write this off to my university training. (Interview, SRM, 23 November 2007)

The SRM’s propensity to equate CSR with broader stakeholder participation partly overlapped with the growing customer demands for a wider conception of CSR, whilst the open-ended nature of these demands gave her considerable freedom in translating them into specific initiatives. In order to make concrete the norm that social performance aspects should be more prominent, the SRM decided to focus on staff-related concerns such as those highlighted by the trade unions in Bravado. In doing so, she can be said to have enacted norms associated with both customer demands and labour rights and to have brought about a degree of intersectionality between these norm circles. Yet, for the causal powers of these norm circles to have an impact on the conception of CSR in Bravado, new accounting technologies with the capacity to channel their activation into managerial actions were required. A major challenge facing the SRM was how to convince the other managers, who primarily saw “shared value” creation as a matter of translating environmental performance improvements into enhanced financial performance, that attention to labour rights also formed a legitimate part of this concept. Similar to the Chairman’s actions in the first phase of our analysis, the SRM decided to address this challenge by exploiting the managers’ predilection for managing by numbers:

In this company everything is measured, has to be measured, God it’s an obsession and a bit weird for someone like me who is considered on the more “touch feely” side […] when that finally sank in (about the numbers and measuring stuff) I realised I needed to engage with it […] I did a lot of stuff at uni. about surveys and measuring and managing culture so I thought I’d start there […] it turned out to be useful in getting traction around the staff initiatives I’d been working on. (Interview, SRM, 3 October 2008)

The use of the social surveys initially appealed to the other managers. However, the results of the first social survey threw into sharp relief how the view of Bravado as a socially responsible company enacted by the managers differed from the norms associated with labour rights as a basis for a somewhat broader conception of CSR. The survey results were overwhelmingly negative with 87 per cent of respondents expressing concerns with their working conditions and 70 per cent with the existence of discrimination and harassment in Bravado’s workplaces. The survey also revealed that staff had a low opinion of their managers’ ability to communicate and, as a result, believed that they did not treat staff fairly or recognise good work. The open-ended responses conveyed particular concerns about the physical working conditions of Bravado. Here, staff strongly expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of their amenities, especially their bathrooms, social break rooms and rest areas, and called for these amenities to be improved immediately. These responses were widely seen as a challenge to the conception of CSR being promoted by senior management and can be seen as an indication of a strong, collective intention among workers to oppose management, which resonated with the criticisms expressed by the trade unions in Bravado. Managers, who were ostensibly unaware of these criticisms, reacted with a sense of surprise. Some of them also expressed a degree of sympathy with the norm that labour rights ought to be taken seriously:

Well, we should be looking after our own. We should be looking after our own business, our own people, it was a clear message. (Interview, Closures Sales Manager, 25 February 2008)

The main aspect about it [was that] we should be looking after our people on the factory floors, they said that we should be looking after them first and make sure they’re OK […] [sigh] that was a strong message. (Interview, National Business Development Manager, 20 February 2008)
At first glance, these reactions may be seen as indicative of a growing sense that workers had legitimate rights that were not effectively served by Bravado’s pursuit of “shared value” creation. However, a more widespread reaction among managers was that the surveys reflected a “very me result”, implying that the workers were rather selfish and not buying into their vision of CSR. Hence, in contrast to the SRM’s deeply felt commitment to a broader conception of CSR, the disposition of the managers to genuinely enact the norms associated with labour rights seemed to be limited. These findings echo those of Rodrigo and Arenas (2008), showing that the views of managerial CSR initiatives differ considerably between blue- and white-collar workers. Nevertheless, the survey results prompted the Chairman to take actions aimed at alleviating what seemed to be the main source of discontent. In particular, the poor quality of amenities offered all too visible evidence of management failure in terms of CSR and, for this reason, improving the amenities was prioritised over the less tangible issues of fair treatment, recognition and communication. As the first step, the Chairman authorised the SRM to distribute a flyer to all staff that both communicated the results of the survey and made a number of commitments to site improvements. The flyer read:

Many of you listed the upgrading of amenities as a priority for your site. As a consequence, we are undertaking an amenities’ review of all sites before launching an improvement program at the end of 2007.

An initial commitment was also made to undertake basic repairs and upgrades and spend money where it would have the most impact, such as “re-painting the lunch room or getting a new microwave”[10]. The monetary commitment for these repairs amounted to an average of $15,000 per site. Importantly, the head office initially agreed to fund this directly, and therefore the initiative would not have any negative impact on the financial performance of the sites, although it would reduce Bravado’s short-term performance.

At one level, the first social survey thus seemed to constitute a relatively effective accounting technology for channelling the activation of the causal powers embedded in customer demands and labour rights into effects that, to a degree, ran counter to the Chairman’s pre-occupation with improving Bravado’s financial performance. If fully activated, the powers of the latter norm circle could have counteracted the counter-performative tendency, emerging from the Chairman’s mobilisation of the “shared value” discourse, and nurtured a broader conception of CSR resembling the holistic ideal espoused by Porter and Kramer (2006, 2011). However, such a scenario was soon negated by the Chairman’s actions. In sharp contrast to the SRM’s promotion of labour rights, the Chairman’s course of action suggests that he saw the company’s response to staff-related concerns as less of a matter of honouring any natural “rights” and more of a matter of bestowing benefits on workers as long as it did not challenge Bravado’s financial performance. Soon after the initial announcement to upgrade amenities, the Chairman decided that the costs of amenities’ upgrades would have to be borne by the individual sites without relaxing their financial performance targets. By and large, this decision caused amenities’ upgrades to fall by the wayside and had a notable, negative impact on the second social survey distributed in 2008. Over two-thirds of the respondents mentioned “improving amenities” as their primary concern and some of the open-ended responses angrily accused management of lying about amenities’ upgrades. Rather than addressing staff grievances, however, the Chairman decided to discontinue the process of administering large-scale, social surveys and resumed more direct control of CSR issues. This development effectively sidelined the SRM and reduced the impetus behind her efforts to promote labour rights:

All of a sudden, I no longer had traction – I was a wheel spinning in the air. Actually, it wasn’t all of sudden – come to think of it I could see the signs. Once the news had broken, and the results were in – and they were not good – the Chairman listened to me and the ways I thought we could address
the problems [...] But then the reality of the situation in terms of its costs made him change his mind. (Interview, SRM, 10 February 2009)

The Chairman also took measures that reduced the intersectionality between customer demands and labour rights and prevented the causal powers of these norm circles from reinforcing each other. The cancellation of amenities’ upgrades and the failure to address staff grievances were not disclosed to Bravado’s customers and, even though the company continued to include staff-related metrics in the information supplied to customers, this information was gathered from smaller surveys of selected workers. The results of the new staff surveys were also communicated exclusively to customers and senior managers rather than being more widely disseminated within the company. Meanwhile, management control practices remained firmly anchored in the environmental scorecard, which continued to focus on how environmental performance aspects could be translated into cost savings. There was little evidence of any changes in favour of placing other performance aspects on the CSR agenda. Once they were satisfied with Bravado’s external reporting of social performance aspects, the customers did not raise further demands on Bravado to integrate such aspects in its management control practices. The causal powers of customer demands can thus be said to have continued to support the conception of CSR promoted by the Chairman. Hence, over the course of our study, the relatively narrow conception of CSR, originating in the Chairman’s mobilisation of the idea of “shared value” creation, was stabilised rather than disrupted by the interplay between multiple norm circles. This perpetuated the performative tendencies originating in this idea.

5. Concluding discussion

This paper has responded to calls for ontological realism in research on performativity (Felin and Foss, 2009a, b) and has advanced a critical realist approach to examine how the pre-existing social structures that surround various accounting technologies condition the performativity of scholarly knowledge claims. Conceiving of such structures in terms of multiple, intersecting norm circles, the distinct contribution of such an approach is that it highlights the role of normativity in relation to performativity originating in scientific knowledge. We have shown how the intersectionality between two norm circles, labelled normative management knowledge and customer demands, gradually caused managers who initially resisted emerging notions of CSR to enact norms reinforcing a relatively narrow conception of “shared value” creation. In contrast, the managers were reluctant to enact competing norms, associated with other norm circles such as labour rights, which challenged this conception of CSR. This led the causal powers of customer demands to consistently buttress the tendency to equate CSR initiatives with enhanced financial performance, whilst those of labour rights failed to counteract this tendency. Whilst these findings resonate with an institutional approach, suggesting that the conceptions of CSR that come to dominate particular social contexts are heavily dependent on the norms that prevail in such contexts (Archel et al., 2011; Brammer et al., 2012; Campbell, 2007), they add an important dimension to extant accounting research concerned with performativity. Although the role of social norms has been discussed in the broader literature on performativity (e.g. Cabantous and Gond, 2011; Ferraro et al., 2005), accounting scholars have arguably foregrounded the performativity of various accounting technologies without paying sufficient attention to the broader ideas and societal reform programmes that imbue such technologies with normative appeal (Miller, 2008; Yang and Modell, 2015). In contrast, a critical realist approach, such as ours, places the reified social norms that condition performative tendencies centre stage. This is not to say that accounting technologies are inconsequential. In Bravado, both the environmental scorecard and the social surveys played an important role in channelling the activation of causal powers embedded in
various norm circles into different courses of action. However, the key insight emerging from our analysis is that pre-existing, social norms can imbue notions of performativity with a certain degree of consistency and regularity and that they, therefore, contribute to stabilising performative tendencies over time.

In contrast to much prior accounting research, our analysis compels us to pay more explicit attention to the structural boundary conditions under which performative tendencies are likely to occur. The distinct contributions of critical realism in this regard need to be situated in relation to broader ontological debates about the possibilities of performativity in the social sciences. According to Bergenholtz and Busch (2016), these debates have been fuelled by a polarisation between those who subscribe to a highly constructivist view, suggesting that scholarly knowledge claims effectively create “new” realities (e.g. Callon, 1998), and those who argue that sustained, performative effects rarely materialise due to the absence of pre-existing, objective realities that are felicitous to such claims (e.g. Felin and Foss, 2009a, b). Critical realism strikes a middle path between these ontological positions by recognising that social realities can undergo significant change in response to the mobilisation of scientific knowledge, but that such change processes are always conditioned by pre-existing realities. More specifically, our empirical analysis draws attention to two, pre-existing boundary conditions that increase the likelihood of conceptions of CSR, such as that evolving in Bravado, having sustained, performative effects. On the one hand, such effects are likely to be buttressed by norm circles, such as customer demands, that reinforce the norm that CSR initiatives are primarily a matter of enhancing corporate competitiveness. On the other hand, the salience of norm circles, such as labour rights, with the causal powers to counteract such managerialist conceptions of CSR would probably need to be limited. However, in our search for boundary conditions, we are not prepared to go as far as Felin and Foss (2009a, b) to argue that scholarly knowledge claims only become performative if they reinforce relatively immutable realities that are inherently felicitous to such claims. Similar to Ligonie (2018), we have rather demonstrated how concepts such as “shared value” creation can transform initially adverse conditions, characterised by managerial resistance, into more felicitous ones for particular conceptions of CSR to take hold. Ignoring this malleable dimension of social realities would be alien to critical realists, who recognise that extant social structures are imbued with a degree of durability, but that at least some of the causal powers embedded in such structures have the capacity to generate change (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1986).

Adopting a critical realist perspective, we also wish to emphasise that the establishment of the boundary conditions under which scholarly knowledge claims become performative needs to entail a high degree of context sensitivity. Following the logic of retroduction and retrodiction, the identification of such boundary conditions needs to progress from the specific tendencies that researchers are seeking to explain and to be firmly situated in the empirical contexts where those tendencies occur. This follows from the view of social structures as imbued with causal powers that may generate similar tendencies across different contexts, although their activation is always context-specific and thus likely to give rise to significant and not entirely predictable variations in the extent to which scholarly knowledge claims become performative (Bhaskar, 1975, 1986; Elder-Vass, 2010). Hence, we are sceptical of advances, such as that of Felin and Foss (2009a, b), who deductively derive general boundary conditions under which broader theories become performative rather than delving into the context-specific contingencies that explain more specific, performative tendencies. However, this does not mean that it is futile to generalise how specific tendencies manifest themselves across different instances of space and time, only that such attempts need to be grounded in a series of repeated studies ideally following a systematic sequence of retroduction and retrodiction (Lawson, 1997; Tsang and Kwan, 1999). By way of implications, we thus refrain from generalising our empirical findings to
other contexts at this stage and rather call for further research into how the tendencies that we have observed are conditioned by a similar set of norm circles whilst recognising that other norm circles, which we have not examined, may give rise to very different outcomes. Critical realism provides an epistemological rationale for such ongoing, cumulative theorising in its capacity as a philosophical under-labourer entertaining a broad range of possible, theoretical explanations of specific tendencies (Bhaskar, 1975).

A critical realist line of inquiry also differs significantly from the mode of theorising that is valorised in most accounting research concerned with performativity (see Hansen, 2011; Vosselman, 2014). Following a highly empiricist epistemology, primarily inspired by actor-network theory, such research typically produces relatively open-ended descriptions of how accounting is implicated in generating performative effects without privileging any social entities, such as norm circles, as explanatory mechanisms through *a priori* theorising. In the context of the present study, such analyses would probably have taken specific accounting technologies, such as the environmental scorecard and the social surveys, as the starting point for mapping the broader social and material practices that evolve around these technologies and that are implicated in performing CSR. This might or might not have affirmed the causal efficacy of the norm circles explored in the present paper. However, in comparison with our critical realist analysis, accounting research exploring the issue of performativity has been more concerned with producing rich empirical descriptions of how accounting is implicated in the construction of social realities than systematically unpacking the causal relationships that underpin performative tendencies (Hansen, 2011; Vosselman, 2014)[11]. This lack of attention to questions of causality is partly due to the strong, ethnographic predilections, privileging the production of thick descriptions, which are associated with actor-network theory. Given the tendency of such research to emphasise the uniqueness of the performative effects observed in specific, empirical contexts (Hansen, 2011), it also downplays the role of cumulative theory development that is increasingly emphasised in the broader, inter-disciplinary accounting literature (Modell et al., 2017; Parker and Northcott, 2016; Richardson, 2018)[12]. Whilst recognising the need for context-sensitive theorising, critical realism is more amenable to cumulative theory development through systematic investigations of the boundary conditions that reinforce and counteract performative tendencies across different contexts. Calls for such cumulative theory development have recently emerged in the broader literature on performativity (Boldyrev and Svetlova, 2016; Marti and Gond, 2018), but have yet to receive greater attention in accounting research concerned with this topic.

The shift from an empiricist to a critical realist epistemology may also contribute to imbuing research on performativity with a more explicit, critical edge. As noted by Vosselman (2014), accounting research exploring the issue of performativity has been criticised for lacking critical intent. The subscription to an empiricist epistemology has arguably compelled researchers to mainly describe empirically observable events whilst paying much less attention to how oppressive and undesirable states of affairs might be altered. The importance of querying how alternatives to such states may be realised is underlined by the assertion that some of the theories that inform contemporary accounting and control practices have performative, but rather detrimental, effects on social development (e.g. Ghoshal and Moran, 1996; Roberts and Jones, 2009). However, following the tenets of critical realism, we would argue that a highly empiricist research programme is perhaps not the most appropriate avenue to this end. Confining research to what is empirically observable is likely to restrict the possibilities of critique to the realisation of actualities, or “what is”, whilst precluding considerations of potentialities, or “what could be”, as a basis for elaborating how current, undesirable states of affairs might be altered. In contrast, critical realism provides an epistemological licence for researchers to go beyond immediate empirical observations in the quest for such potentialities and, using the concept
of retroduction, envisage how performative tendencies that constrain emancipatory, social change might be counteracted by diverse causal powers. Even though such tendencies may be buttressed by seemingly robust social structures, as was the case in Bravado, critical realists recognise that the constraining effects of such structures are never totalising and that it may be possible to identify opportunities for agents to act differently (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1986). However, this requires a profound understanding of which social structures are imbued with constraining and enabling properties and how agents can harness the causal powers of such structures in their attempts to alter undesirable states of affairs (see Modell, 2017a, b).

Whilst we see many advantages to extending a critical realist line of inquiry to the development of radical social critiques, we believe that there is a need for accounting researchers to engage more actively with the field to this end. The application of critical realism in such critical research interventions is still in its infancy (Modell, 2017a, b) and, following the discussion in the present paper, it is necessary to consider how such interventions, themselves, may be performative. The possibilities of advancing research, which entails such “critical performativity”, have recently been subject to considerable debate (e.g. Cabantous et al., 2016; Fleming and Banerjee, 2016; Spicer et al., 2009, 2016). In their initial articulation of this research programme, Spicer et al. (2009) emphasised the importance of considering potentialities, rather than confining empirical research to actualities, and for researchers to recognise how their mobilisation of scholarly knowledge claims can help research subjects realise such potentialities. As explicated above, critical realism is arguably well-placed to advance a deeper understanding of such potentialities. However, given the under-determined and fallible nature of critical realist inquiries, it is important to recognise the unanticipated consequences that may emerge. We see critical realism as a useful vehicle for understanding the conditions under which performative research interventions may engender emancipatory changes whilst, at the same time, constituting an antidote to overly optimistic projections as to how this may materialise. Research interventions informed by critical realism can thus help to address emerging concerns that the literature on critical performativity has over-emphasised the propensity of scholarly knowledge claims to be performative (Butler et al., 2018; Fleming and Banerjee, 2016) by providing a nuanced understanding of when this may or may not be the case.

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Notes
1. Critical realists use the notion of tendencies, or demi-regularities (Lawson, 1997), to distinguish the regularities that follow from the activation of causal powers from more deterministic, law-bound conceptions of causality (Bhaskar, 1975; Elder-Vass, 2010).

2. It is the collective intentions to enforce particular norms that imbue norm circles with emergent causal powers that are distinct from those of the individual social actors that make up norm circles. However, individual actors that belong to a particular norm circle may still be seen as “proximal norm circles” (see Elder-Vass, 2010, pp. 127-130) insofar as they exert influence on other actors that is in line with these norms.
3. See Modell (2017a, b) for an extended discussion of how objectified social structures interact with subjective dispositions and how this interplay is reflected in critical realist and cognate bodies of accounting research.

4. The real company name has been disguised.

5. Examples of such questions included queries into which actors were most instrumental in influencing the development of key control practices, such as the environmental scorecard, and who might take an interest in such practices.


7. In Australia, the flag is regarded as a symbol of rebellion and class struggle, and is closely associated with working class values.


9. Quotes from interviews with General Manager of Steel (23 February 2007) and Sales Manager (10 February 2007).

10. Interview, SRM, 3 October 2008.

11. A similar lack of rigorous causal analyses has recently been noted in the broader literature on performativity that informs much of this accounting research (Marti and Gond, 2018).

12. As noted by Modell et al. (2017), cumulative theory development of the type concerned here is, strictly speaking, incompatible with the epistemology of the actor-network theory.

References


### Table AI.
Overview of interviews in Bravado

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12 February 2007</td>
<td>Environmental Responsibility Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>2 h 30 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 February 2007</td>
<td>Social Responsibility Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>2 h 5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 February 2007</td>
<td>GM – Foam</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1 h 26 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 February 2007</td>
<td>GM – Closures</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1 h 48 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Feb 2007</td>
<td>GM – Steel</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1 h 52 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 February 2007</td>
<td>GM – Procurement &amp; Logistics</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>56 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 February 2007</td>
<td>GM – Rigid Plastics Division</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>1 h 14 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>16 February 2007</td>
<td>Site Manager – Plant A</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 36 min</td>
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<td>Foam Sales Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>1 h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 February 2007</td>
<td>Site Manager – Plant B (Plant tour)</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>2 h 15 min</td>
</tr>
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<td>21 February 2007</td>
<td>ESQ Manager – Plant B</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>45 min</td>
</tr>
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<td>Steel Sales Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>1 h 57 min</td>
</tr>
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<td>ESQ Manager – Plant A (Plant tour)</td>
<td>Site</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 February 2007</td>
<td>Management Accountant – Plant A</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 10 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 February 2007</td>
<td>Marketing Manager – Plant A</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 32 min</td>
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<td>24 April 2007</td>
<td>Social Responsibility Manager (phone)</td>
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<td>45 min</td>
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<td>Social Responsibility Manager (phone)</td>
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<td>35 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>14 September 2007</td>
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<td>46 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>23 November 2007</td>
<td>Social Responsibility Manager (phone)</td>
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<td>1 h</td>
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<tr>
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<td>19 February 2008</td>
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<td>2 h 12 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 February 2008</td>
<td>Site Manager – Plant C</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 5 min</td>
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<tr>
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<td>ESQ Manager – Plant C</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h</td>
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<tr>
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<td>National Business Development Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>1 h 45 min</td>
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<td>20 February 2008</td>
<td>National ESQ Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>1 h 23 min</td>
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<td>Production Manager – Plant A</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 9 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 February 2008</td>
<td>HR Manager – Plant A</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 24 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 February 2008</td>
<td>Site Manager – Plant D</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 18 min</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 February 2008</td>
<td>ESQ Manager – Plant D</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 23 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 February 2008</td>
<td>HR Manager – Plant D</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>36 min</td>
</tr>
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<td>25 February 2008</td>
<td>Closures Sales Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>1 h 20 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 February 2008</td>
<td>Rigid Plastics Sales Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>53 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 February 2008</td>
<td>Site Manager – Plant E</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 February 2008</td>
<td>Production Manager – Plant B</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 5 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 February 2008</td>
<td>Management Accountant – Plant B</td>
<td>Site</td>
<td>1 h 55 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 October 2008</td>
<td>Social Responsibility Manager</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>1 hr</td>
</tr>
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<td>10 February 2009</td>
<td>Social Responsibility Manager</td>
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<td>1 hr 10 min</td>
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<td>29 January 2010</td>
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<td>27 August 2012</td>
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<td>1 h 45 min</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 December 2014</td>
<td>Ex – Social Responsibility Manager no longer employed at Bravado</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>2 h 34 min</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Total interviews: 41; total interview time: 58 h 38 min

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