

## Talking into (Non)existence

### *Denying or Constituting Paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility*

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*Published in:*  
Human Relations

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1177/0018726717721306](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717721306)

*Publication date:*  
2018

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Hoffmann, J. (2018). Talking into (Non)existence: Denying or Constituting Paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Human Relations*, 71(5), 668-691. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726717721306>

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**Talking into (non)existence:**

## **Denying or constituting paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility**

### **Abstract**

Organizations can be understood as sites of persistent tensions between equally legitimate claims. In other words, organizations may be paradoxical. However, paradoxes do not pre-exist as a matter of fact. This paper investigates how dominant academic discourses on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) either constitute or deny potential CSR paradoxes. It follows the theoretical perspective of CCO – Communication Constitutes Organizations and, more specifically, a ventriloquial approach. Academics are like ventriloquists, they breath life into dummies who establish theoretical figures that may or may not support paradoxical thinking in organizational research. The qualitative meta-analysis shows that potential CSR paradoxes are primarily talked into nonexistence. Managerial ventriloquists reject CSR tensions in the interests of organizational consistency and harmony. Critical ventriloquists accept tensions, but assume their causes lie in gaps between CSR rhetoric and practice. The preferred figure is not a paradoxical one, but that of organizational hypocrisy. Overall, non-paradoxical CSR approaches dominate; they, in turn, ventriloquize their creators, thereby limiting the scope of future research. A communicative perspective is instead open to the constitution of CSR paradoxes. It enables practitioners to engage in a proactive management of organizational tensions and encourages academics to reflect on the constituted nature of academic discourses.

Paradox is an increasingly popular term in organizational research. It supports a tension-centered approach, which ‘begins with the premise that organizations are conflicted sites of human activity; accordingly, foregrounding tension can lead to richer understandings of actual practice and thereby aid in theory building’ (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004: 82). The paradox perspective offers an alternative to corporate narratives on harmony, effectivity, and mutually beneficial stakeholder relations. It challenges ‘linear cause-and-effect thinking and assumptions on equilibrium (...) based on the – particularly in the USA – dominant paradigm of logical positivism’ (Ehnert, 2009: 139). Paradox theories go beyond positivism, behaviorism and cognitivism and reject consistency models both as an ideal and as a basic principle of organizing (El-Sawad et al., 2004, Poole and Van de Ven, 1989). The key idea is that organizations are exposed to social practices that contradict one another, even though these practices are equally perceived to be legitimate and relevant to the success of an organization (Quinn and Cameron, 1988a). This is an inspiring, but at the same time also an irritating paradigm, since it does not offer simple ‘preferred’ choices in organizational decision-making. Instead, individuals take difficult choices; they are exposed to dilemmas (Giddens, 1991).

Accordingly, there is a growing interest in the question of how to manage organizational paradoxes. However, paradox management requires that these paradoxes are actually acknowledged in the first instance. For example, Poole and Van de Veens oft-quoted categorization of paradox response strategies comprising ‘opposition, spatial separation, temporal separation, and synthesis’ (1989: 565) does not consider paradox denials as an option that could be selected even before the question of appropriate responses actually enters the agenda. I assume that, in spite of their growing theoretical popularity, paradoxes are also talked into nonexistence. These processes are underexamined, both theoretically and empirically. There

is a need to pay more attention to ‘the different ways of getting rid of a paradox again’ (Luhmann, 2005: 104). Thus, instead of tackling the question of paradox management, I take one step back and ask: How are paradoxes constituted through communication? And how are they denied through communication?

Increasingly often, scholars discuss whether paradoxes ought to be seen as inherent to organizational life (Beech et al., 2004) or whether they should be analyzed as social constructions (Clegg, 2002). In their influential book, Cameron and Quinn promoted a position that contradicts traditional positivistic approaches: ‘Fundamentally, paradox is a mental construct. It exists only in the thoughts or interpretation of individuals.’ (1988: 4) They argue in favor of a cognitivist version of constructivism, which is extended by a theoretical framework I will follow in this article: CCO – Communication Constitutes Organizations (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Putnam and Nicotera 2009; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Organizational paradoxes are constructed, but they are more than mental constructs. They turn into social structures and can be observed as sense-making practices (Putnam et al., 2016). Thus, the CCO perspective does not look at the communication *of* practices *within* organizational structures, but instead analyses the organization *as* communication. Paradoxes are communicated into existence or they are communicated into nonexistence. Once they emerge as a distinct social structure, they influence future communication and the communicators who first brought them to life.

Within the CCO framework, it is Cooren’s (2010) ventriloqual approach in particular aims to reconcile a constructivist perspective on organizations with a more structural view. It does so by developing a recursive relationship between an actant (e.g., manager, worker, researcher) enabling a human or non-human dummy (e.g., text) to claim distinct social realities – so-called figures (e.g., paradox). This part of the communication process represents the constructivist

perspective. Figures do not pre-exist - they are dependent on the actant as the ventriloquist who is ventriloquizing 'principles, values, interests, (aspects of) ideologies, norms, or experiences' (Cooren et al., 2013: 256). However, even though they are communicative constructs, they add the structural perspective to the model. Figures materialize and gain the potential to ventriloquize back on their ventriloquist. The recursive cycle begins again, as ventriloquists start to speak in the name of the figures they previously brought to life. Cooren (2010) describes this process as an ongoing *vacillation*: Communicated figures develop into distinct social structures, which, in turn, rebound on the actants who feel both animated and constrained by them. It is impossible to decide whether the figures communicated by the dummy precede or follow the talk of the ventriloquist. In the long term, *vacillation* may feed into a *cultivation* process (Cooren, 2010). Figures become powerful by means of continuous repetition and acknowledgement. In academic discourse, for example, cultivation has a 'sealing off' effect on paradigms. Academic ventriloquists vacillate between talking a paradigm into existence and speaking in its name.

Cooren et al. believe that the ventriloquial approach is particularly instructive when analyzing organizational tensions. They argue that 'tensions that are inherent in an organizational system are 'performed into existence' in ongoing interactions and it is our task, as communication researchers, to decipher their various manifestations' (2013: 261). Accordingly, the questions that arise are: how are organizational paradoxes talked into existence and how are they talked into nonexistence? I will identify theoretical figures through which academic ventriloquists constitute or deny paradoxes within a contentious field of organizational practice: Corporate Social Responsibility. The schism between managerial or functionalist views on the one hand, and critical or normative scholarship on the other, is particularly evident in CSR research (see e.g. the dispute between Porter and Kramer, 2011 and Crane et al., 2014). The primary goal of

the present article is to identify paradox constitutions or denials in these two established discourses from a communicative meta-perspective. In addition, I will also show how a constitutive paradox approach can offer an alternative and contribute to the emerging ‘third way’ of post-positivistic CSR research.

As a first step, this requires the identification of elements that constitute a paradoxical relationship. I will postulate three key propositions: a paradoxical figure is created when two elements are concurrently claimed (1) to co-exist, (2) to have equal value, and (3) to contradict one another. These propositions are then applied to CSR research by means of a qualitative meta-analysis, which then facilitates a theoretical synthesis (Paterson et al., 2001) The ventriloquism approach and the paradox perspective function as the framework for the *analysis* of research that *analyses* CSR. Contrary to a literature review, the focus is on an interpretation of literature from a distinct theoretical perspective, the goal is not a comprehensive description and aggregation of CSR research. Thus, the ‘empirical database’ is necessarily selective. It comprises publications that to some degree operate with item pairs and the meta-analysis will investigate whether researchers’ understandings of the relationships between these pairs would result in either the constitution or denial of a paradox.

An inductive reasoning was applied to identify five prominent CSR themes, which follow a binary logic: (1) motives behind a company engaging in CSR: intrinsic vs. extrinsic, (2) potential effects of CSR: business case vs. ethical case, (3) the positioning of CSR practices: integrated vs. discretionary, (4) the way in which CSR is communicated: implicit vs. explicit, and (5) the relationship between CSR talk and CSR action. The three paradox propositions might or might not be acknowledged for each of these item pairs. If acknowledged, a paradox as a theoretical figure is talked into existence. If denied, I will identify the theoretical figures replacing the

paradox. The final theoretical synthesis of the analytical findings will improve our understanding of how and why dominant CSR schools of thinking promote or reject distinct CSR figures.

### **Organizational paradoxes: three propositions**

Drawing attention to organizational tensions is a key merit of paradox approaches. However, Poole and van de Ven point out ‘that many writers use the term loosely, as an informal umbrella for interesting and thought-provoking contradictions of all sorts’ (1989: 563). While their observation is still valid for a large portion of research, their article of 1989, together with Quinn and Cameron’s (1988b) edited volume on paradoxes of change management, marked the starting point for the gradual development of a more systematic and theoretically reflected research agenda. A number of studies since then have aimed to identify and investigate potential paradoxes in a broad range of organizational fields:

- Autonomy and connectedness (Gibbs, 2009)
- Centralization and decentralization (Siggelkow and Levinthal, 2003)
- Change and identity (Fiol, 2002)
- Deduction and induction (Regnér, 2003)
- Differentiation and integration (Hylmö and Buzzanell, 2002)
- Entity and process (Schoeneborn et al., 2016)
- Exploration and exploitation (March, 1991)
- Flexibility and efficiency (Adler et al., 1999)
- Freedom and control (Clegg et al., 2002)
- Growth and sustainability (Probst and Raisch, 2005)
- Homogeneity and heterogeneity (Ashcraft, 2006)
- Ideology and viability (D’Enbeau and Buzzanell, 2011)

- Inclusion and exclusion (Solebello et al., 2016)
- Individuality and collectivity (Murnighan and Conlon, 1991)
- Internal and external (Lewis et al., 2010)
- Opportunity and threat (Gilbert, 2006)
- Participation and leadership (Stohl and Cheney, 2001)
- Resilience and efficiency (Figge, 2004)
- Sales and service (Oakes, 1990)
- Work and family (Rothbard, 2001)

This (inevitably incomplete) overview of conceptual and empirical studies illustrates that a tension-centered perspective has already been applied to a broad range of organizational topics.

However, not everybody would agree that each of these item pairs constitutes a paradox.

Definitions differ, but it is possible to identify three paradox propositions, derived from studies that specifically discuss terminological issues (Cameron and Quinn, 1988a; Ehnert 2009; Hahn et al., 2015; Poole and van de Ven, 1989; Smith and Lewis, 2011):

1. *Empirical paradox proposition*: A paradox comprises two co-existing elements that are perceived to be relevant and persistent. *Day vs. Night* is not a paradox, since the two alternate. Instead, organizational *differentiation vs. integration* could constitute a paradox, since both elements may be experienced simultaneously.
2. *Normative paradox proposition*: Both elements of the paradox are justifiable; both are perceived to be legitimate. *Good vs. Bad* is not a paradox, because this marks the distinction between socially acceptable and socially unacceptable behavior. Organizational *planning vs. flexibility*, meanwhile, are both value claims and, thus, could constitute a paradox.



3. *Relational paradox proposition*: The elements of a paradox are interrelated, but not mutually supportive. They contradict each other, there is a tension between them. *Yin vs. Yang* is not a paradox because both forces are perceived to be complementary in their striving for wholeness. Organizational *collaboration vs. competition* could instead be treated as a contradiction and could, therefore, constitute a paradox.

A paradox is talked into existence when all three propositions are claimed simultaneously. It is talked into nonexistence if at least one of the propositions is denied. It is the counter-intuitive concurrence of the *normative* and the *relational proposition* in particular that makes the paradox perspective so unique and thought-provoking. It leads us 'to ask what we are valuing in our analysis and what is the *opposite positive* value' (Quinn and Cameron, 1988a p. 292; emphasis added). Based on the CCO paradigm and referring to the ventriloqual approach, I suggest a definition embedding all three propositions: *An organizational paradox is the communicative constitution of a relationship between two simultaneously ventriloquized figures, both of which are claimed to be legitimate while at the same time contradicting each other*. This definition will be the basis for the identification and discussion of the relational figures, which either constitute or deny paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility.

### **Potential paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility**

As in other organizational research fields, studies on CSR use the term paradox primarily in a metaphorical way (e.g., Campbell, 2006; Waddock and Googins, 2011; Wheeler et al., 2002). There are, however, noteworthy exceptions. For instance, Scherer et al. (2013) argue in favor of a corporate paradox approach when responding to sustainability claims. Pursuant to this, managers ought to apply strategies like manipulation, adaptation and moral reasoning simultaneously. What these authors do not discuss is how contradictions between these strategies

are either accepted or rejected. Hahn et al. (2015), in turn, point out the crucial importance of acknowledging tensions of corporate sustainability and challenging an instrumental CSR reasoning. However, they then quickly move to locating seemingly pre-existing paradoxes within the organization and prescribing suitable management responses. They also lose sight of the communicative constitution or denial of paradoxes.

Managerial perspectives committed to an instrumental reasoning represent one school of CSR thinking. They are frequently challenged by critical CSR researchers who are committed to highly normative narratives in which the company ends up being the ‘bad guy’. Meanwhile, it is the ‘third way’ offered by post-positivist approaches which allows a more balanced view by accounting for the contextuality of cultures, the subjectivity of perceptions and, not least, the performative power of communication (Castello, Morsing and Schultz, 2012; Christensen and Cheney 2011; Haack, Schoeneborn and Wickert, 2012; Scherer and Palazzo 2007; Schoeneborn and Trittin, 2013).

Overall, the three CSR schools of thinking – the managerial or functionalist, the critical or normative and the emerging communicative or constitutive one (Crane and Glozer, forthcoming) – seldom make explicit use of paradox theories, despite the fact they all rely heavily on theoretical item pairs. In the following, five salient item pairs will be extracted from CSR literature and I will then analyze whether the three CSR schools would allow those five item pairs to be constituted as paradoxical figures on the basis of the three paradox propositions introduced above.

#### *Motive paradox: intrinsic vs. extrinsic*

The first potential paradox relates to the motives behind a company engaging in CSR: ‘Extrinsic or self-interested motives have the ultimate goal of increasing the brand’s own welfare (e.g.,

increase sales/profits or improve corporate image), whereas intrinsic or selfless motives have the ultimate goal of doing good and/or fulfilling obligations towards society as a whole (e.g., benefit the community or cause upon which the CSR actions focus).’ (Du et al., 2007: 226; see also Basu and Palazzo, 2008) Extrinsic motives are sometimes also called ulterior motives, whereas intrinsic motives are said to be altruistic (Strahilevitz, 2003). Most research on CSR motives refers to attribution theory (Gilbert and Malone, 1995; Sjoval and Talk, 2004) and builds on two assumptions: (1) Individual behavior is assessed based on the motives assumed to be driving it. (2) People treat organizations like individuals (Hamilton and Sherman, 1996). This results in a simple ‘attribution error’ and a more complex one (Skowronski and Carlston, 1989):

- If a company does something bad, then it is because of their bad motives.
- If a company does something good, then it is either (a) because of intrinsic (good) motives or (b) because of extrinsic (bad) motives.

For CSR, this means that practices are appreciated as ‘good behavior’ only if publics believe that the motives behind these practices are not merely extrinsic, i.e. ‘instrumental to some separable consequence’ (Ryan and Deci, 2000: 65). This becomes problematic if the only reason a company engages in CSR is perceived to be a better reputation and an increase in sales (Gao and Bansal: 2013). In consequence, prescriptive experimental business research attempts to identify convincing signifiers that lead stakeholders to believe that CSR practices are indeed based on intrinsic and not extrinsic motives. For example, it is recommended that CSR practices should be reported by an independent source, that the salience of firm-serving benefits should appear low and that there should be no ‘over-communication’ of CSR activities (Yoon et al., 2006). In other words, companies are advised to follow an instrumental rationality when attempting to convince

stakeholders that their CSR is intrinsically motivated and, as such, does not follow an instrumental rationality.

Critical CSR researchers also make use of corporate motives as a convenient and plausible explanation for the way in which CSR is conducted. Frynas (2005), for example, reports some striking observations from oil companies' community relations in the Niger delta. Why, for example, did a company provide three town halls for one and the same community? Was it their extrinsic motive to please three powerful community chiefs, because each of them was awarded a contract for the construction of a house? Frynas argues that it is impossible to explain these kind of absurd CSR practices without assuming ulterior motives.










Ultimately, however, motives are not open to empirical observation. Companies cannot be held accountable for them. Despite this, or indeed because of it, motives are talked into existence as theoretical figures, but neither the managerial nor the critical CSR school allow these figures to enter a paradoxical relationship. Managerial research does not see any contradiction between intrinsic and extrinsic motives. It promotes the behavioristic application of an instrumental rationality in order to prove that CSR is not driven by an instrumental rationality. The *relational paradox proposition*, which would assume a tension between intrinsic and extrinsic motives, is rejected. Instead, the extrinsically driven application of communication tools serves to prove the existence of morally privileged intrinsic motives, a strategy which can – from the outside – be seen as a paradox in itself.

Critical CSR research also tends to deny the motive paradox. While acknowledging a contradiction between extrinsic and intrinsic motives, it doubts the co-existence of the two by assuming that the communication of intrinsic motives is corporate window-dressing (rejection of *empirical paradox proposition*), when in fact problematic extrinsic motives prevail (rejection of

*normative paradox proposition*). It is doubted that corporations are concurrently driven by equally relevant and equally legitimate intrinsic and extrinsic motives. The paradox denial of critical research follows a general suspicion towards CSR communication concerning corporate motives and their presumed authenticity (L'Etang et al., 2011).

A ventriloqual approach would instead analyze so-called window-dressing practices as powerful figures potentially bouncing back on the corporate ventriloquist when reflecting on own motives. Christensen and Cheney argue that ‘to assume that organizational motivations and intentions are clear, accessible to us given once and for all is to ignore the constructive power of communication in exploring and thereby enacting new ambitions and preferences’ (2011: 499). It is the CCO perspective that allows the constitution of a motive paradox as a conflictual patchwork of intermingled extrinsic and intrinsic CSR motives (see Table 1). Acknowledging these dynamics leaves room both for ‘crowding-out’ and ‘crowding in’ effects. External ‘rewards’ may indeed crowd out internal CSR motives (Graafland and van de Ven, 2006), but there might, in turn, also be an internalization of formerly extrinsic motives (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Then ‘crowding in’ takes place: Ventriloquists start to listen seriously to their intrinsically motivated dummies.

**Table 1. Motive paradox: intrinsic vs. extrinsic**

	<b>Managerial perspective</b>	<b>Critical perspective</b>	<b>Communicative perspective</b>
Empirical paradox proposition: <b>Co-existence</b>			
Normative paradox proposition: <b>Equal value</b>			
Relational paradox proposition: <b>Contradiction</b>			
Paradox is...	...denied.	...denied.	...constituted.

### *Effects paradox: ethical case vs. business case*

An effects paradox would constitute a potential trade-off: CSR effects, which are desirable on ethical grounds, might have negative consequences for corporate profits (Hahn et al., 2015). This argument is closely related to the motive paradox: Intrinsic motives are seen as drivers for CSR practices supporting the ethical case, as distinguishable from extrinsic motives as drivers for CSR practices supporting the business case.

The main purpose of managerial CSR research is to deny a paradoxical tension between the ethical case and the business case for CSR (e.g., Carroll and Shabana, 2010; Porter and Kramer, 2011): What is good for society is also good for the company. The paradigm lines up with traditional stakeholder theory, which assumes that a broad, inclusive and responsive stakeholder management also makes a company more successful in financial terms (Freeman, 1984). Critical research points out that questions of power are largely ignored in these kinds of harmonistic business approaches. Crane et al.'s dazzling deconstruction of Porter and Kramer's popular 'Corporate Social Value' approach is worth highlighting. They exemplify the 'failure to deal adequately with trade-offs between economic and social value creation' (2014: 136). Blind spots of an instrumental CSR reasoning are uncovered: 'Much of CSR has entered the agenda of business academia in the Trojan horse of the 'business case.' If CSR leads to more revenue, cuts costs, or (more indirectly) reduces risks and protects the license to operate, there is really no longer the question whether CSR is legitimate, it just becomes a question of how to make it serve the economic purpose of the firm.' (2014: 142) Paradox theory offers an alternative to instrumental business case thinking by assuming that 'many corporate decisions related to social and environmental problems, however creative the decision-maker may be, do not present themselves as potential win-wins, but rather will manifest themselves in terms of dilemmas'

(2014: 136). Overall, these disputes reveal two dominant communicative figures promoted by functionalist business scholars in order to deny a paradoxical tension between the ethical case and the business case for CSR:










- *Win-Win figure*: Business case and ethical case have equal value and are mutually supportive.
- *Mean-End figure*: Research designs are *de facto* guided by an instrumental logic: the contribution of CSR to organizational success (Carroll and Shabana, 2010; Jensen, 2001; Lockett et al., 2006).

In both figures, the business case and the ethical case co-exist and they are both legitimate. The *empirical* and *normative paradox propositions* are accepted, but the *relational paradox proposition* is rejected: Trade-offs are ruled out. Critical research, in turn, presupposes contradictions (Bjerregard and Luring, 2013; Vogel, 2005) and assumes that, when confronted with trade-offs, companies are more likely to prioritize the business case at the cost of the ethical case. Thus, the *relational paradox proposition* is accepted, but the *empirical* and the *normative paradox propositions* are rejected: companies appear to be guided by the less legitimate business case.

So, once more, both CSR camps tend to deny a potential CSR paradox and, again, they do so for different reasons (see Table 2). In contrast, the CCO perspective enables the constitution of the effects paradox as a theoretical figure: Both the ethical case and the business case matter (*empirical paradox proposition*), both are legitimate (*normative paradox proposition*) and there is a tension between them (*relational paradox proposition*). It would then be up to empirical research to find out how companies deal with this, e.g. by prioritizing one element over the other, by promoting a win-win ideology or by communicating the paradox into a functional mean-end relationship. Thus, the manager as ventriloquist is not simply a more or less effective agent

pursuing given ends. The ends themselves are ventriloquized as figures and turn into “moving targets” (Haack and Schoeneborn, 2015: 307). The result is not necessarily ethical relativism. Virtue ethics for instance may still drive “the practice of making and sustaining the institution” (Moore, 2008: 505). Paradox theory is then neither contingent nor does it share the determinism of CSR figures promoted by managerial and traditional critical discourses.

**Table 2. Effect paradox: ethical case vs. business case**

	Managerial perspective	Critical perspective	Communicative perspective
Empirical paradox proposition: <b>Co-existence</b>			
Normative paradox proposition: <b>Equal value</b>			
Relational paradox proposition: <b>Contradiction</b>			
Paradox is...	...denied.	...denied.	...constituted.

*Practice paradox: Integrated vs. discretionary*

A common argument among business scholars and consultants is that a ‘broader construct of corporate responsibility (...) is more holistic, integrated, and strategic in its orientation because it deals not just with discretionary responsibilities, but the impacts of the company’s business model.’ (Waddock and Googins, 2011: 25; see also Du et al., 2007; Weaver et al., 1999).

Discretionary philanthropic and charitable activities are interpreted as isolated add-ons, whereas integrating CSR into a ‘part of the corporate DNA’ (Waddock and Googins, 2011: 30) sounds like a reasonable normative benchmark. Accordingly, integrated and discretionary CSR practices would not constitute a paradox, because the latter is perceived to be less justifiable. The *normative paradox proposition* is rejected: Instead of assuming equal legitimacy, integrated












practices are upvalued, while discretionary practices are devalued. Critical researchers are similarly suspicious of discretionary practices and malign them as ‘window dressing’ that distracts from the unwillingness of companies to engage in ‘real’ integrated CSR (rejection of *normative* and *empirical paradox proposition*) (Slack, 2012). The devaluation of discretionary CSR is in line with a positivistic distinction between ‘real’ practices on the one hand, and less important communications ‘about’ these practices on the other. Waddock and Goodins, for example, claim ‘that the message, that is being communicated is consistent, integrated deeply with the company’s business practices, and based on authentic values and the actual strategy of the firm. Authentic means real, not just fluff, and truly not ‘just’ public relations. What is not ‘real’ or authentic will quickly become known – and quite visible – in today’s electronically connected environment.’ (2011: 37)

Constituting a practice paradox would require arguments from a communication perspective to the effect that integrated CSR is not necessarily ‘better’ than decoupled practices. Firstly, there are pragmatic reasons: Discretionary CSR can be clearly defined, easily observed and evaluated as a distinct corporate commitment. Integrated CSR, meanwhile, is less tangible and more difficult to communicate to publics. It might be perceived to be more authentic, but it is less visible. Secondly, discretionary CSR activities are less under suspicion of directly serving business interests. The CSR activity of a computer firm supplying schools with free laptops is close to the core business, but precisely because of this, it can also be perceived as nothing more than a marketing ploy designed to socialize children with the brand from an early age. The closer the activity is to the company’s business, the higher the risk of attributing extrinsic motives. Finally, and most importantly, integrated CSR might draw additional attention to the ‘dark side’ of the business. Nobody would dream of recommending that a tobacco company support cancer

treatment, despite the fact that such a project would be strongly related to the core business of the industry (Palazzo and Richter, 2005). In other words, discretionary activities run less risk of drawing attention to inherently problematic aspects of a company's business model. In any case, it is more difficult to scrutinize the claims of integrated CSR, so that integrated CSR might ultimately be more discretionary than philanthropic 'add-ons'.

Nevertheless, integrated CSR has become a powerful managerial figure creating the impression that every business has a pure and immaculate core, which functions as a kind of natural base camp for authentic and credible CSR practices. In turn, critical research assumes the prevalence of discretionary practices and delegitimizes them as PR stunts, 'window dressing' or 'greenwashing'. They appear like staged practices which would only distract from the problematic nature of the business itself. The CCO perspective instead shifts communication center stage and would argue that the positivistic distinction between discretionary 'fluff' and 'real' integrated practices does not explain, but instead prevents us from understanding the dynamics of organizational tensions resulting from the co-existence of competing figures (Haack and Schoeneborn, 2015; see Table 3). What today appears to be discretionary might be talked into the 'corporate DNA' tomorrow (Haack, Schoeneborn and Wickert, 2012; Livesey and Graham 2007)

**Table 3. Practice paradox: integrated vs. discretionary**

	<b>Managerial perspective</b>	<b>Critical perspective</b>	<b>Communicative perspective</b>
Empirical paradox proposition: <b>Co-existence</b>			
Normative paradox proposition: <b>Equal value</b>			
Relational paradox proposition: <b>Contradiction</b>			
Paradox is...	...denied.	...denied.	...constituted.










*Communication paradox: implicit vs. explicit*

A disesteem of communication as a social practice is also mirrored in the distinction between implicit and explicit communication: ‘Although companies are regularly encouraged to engage in CSR, they are simultaneously discouraged to communicate about this engagement.’ (Morsing et al., 2008: 97) Jones and Pittman refer to this phenomenon as ‘self-promoters’ paradox’ (1982: 243). Empirical research based on attribution theory points out that highly salient self-promotional communication decrease the credibility of corporate messages (Sjovall and Talk 2004; Yoon et al., 2006). In other words, there could be ‘too much communication’ on CSR. Communications ‘are likely to be more successful if they are indirect and subtle’ (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990: 187). Thus, implicit and explicit are the two poles of a potential communication paradox (Martin, 1982). The former can easily become inaudible, but is more credible, whereas the latter is easily heard, but lacks credibility. Prescriptive managerial research recommends the use of ‘independent’ external sources to communicate on the organization’s behalf (Yoon et al., 2006). The growing popularity of all kinds of CSR certificates, CSR rankings and business partnerships in NGOs (Ihlen, 2011; Shamir, 2004; Slack, 2012) can be seen as a consequence of the prioritization of implicit communication. In the broader context of public relations, the

instrumentalization of NGOs as ‘front groups’ (Palenchar and Fitzpatrick, 2009) has been the subject of critical discussions. They illustrate that the critical CSR camp not only devalues explicit CSR communication as ‘window-dressing’, but is also suspicious towards implicit communication, which is perceived not to be transparent. Thus, however companies communicate, their ventriloquized figures will most likely be claimed to be deceptive. As such, critical CSR research shows normative reservations towards any CSR communication, while functionalists once again fail to reflect on their own self-contradictory advice: They equip their dummies with explicit instructions on how to let CSR communication appear implicit.

The common ground of both the functionalist and the critical figure is the rejection of the *normative paradox proposition* (see Table 4). Functionalist and critical ventriloquists tell the world that great CSR practices speak for themselves, so that talking about them would sully their innocence. A communicative perspective would instead appreciate the potential legitimacy of both explicit and implicit CSR communication. Highlighting CSR through so-called “greenwashing”, but also its opposite, namely explicit market rhetorics that downplay CSR practices through “brownwashing” (Kim and Lyon 2015) or “greenhushing” (Font et al., forthcoming) should not be dismissed as ‘misaligned’ communication. Instead, this may reflect powerful and context-sensitive positioning strategies (Matten and Moon, 2008). Ventriloquists follow an *inverted positioning* (Hoffmann and Kristensen, forthcoming) promoted by their dummies which may ultimately change their corporate practices and public perceptions.

**Table 4. Communication paradox: implicit vs. explicit**

	Managerial perspective	Critical perspective	Communicative perspective
Empirical paradox proposition: <b>Co-existence</b>			
Normative paradox proposition: <b>Equal value</b>			
Relational paradox proposition: <b>Contradiction</b>			
Paradox is...	...denied.	...denied.	...constituted.

*Talk vs. action paradox*







Thus far, the theoretical exploration has illustrated that paradox denial strategies in Corporate Social Responsibility go hand in hand with a striking devaluation of communication processes: ‘Such commonplace notions as ‘action speaks louder than words,’ ‘talk is cheap’ and that things are ‘easier said than done’ reflect the cultural privileging of action over discourse in Western culture.’ (Grant et al., 1998: 5). Action appears to have ‘real’ value, whereas communication seems somewhat shoddy. Thus, a potential paradoxical link between talk and action is also to be denied: Talk has less value than action (rejection of *normative paradox proposition*) and talk should be consistent with action (rejection of *relational paradox proposition*). Instead of acknowledging tensions, research is ‘replete with calls for congruity and alignment between corporate talk and action’ (Christensen and Cheney, 2011: 495).

Both managerial and traditional critical research share the consistency figure, but, again, they reach different conclusions. Prescriptive functionalist research first reminds managers that there could be ‘a very real gap between corporate rhetoric (...) and corporate practice’ (Waddock and Googins, 2011: 25) before promoting their gap-closing toolboxes (e.g., Basil and Erlandson, 2008; Du and Vieira, 2012; Preuss, 2015; Wagner et al., 2009; Yoon et al., 2006). Critical

scholars are skeptical about the alignment capabilities of corporations and aim to convince us that CSR ‘remains largely ‘window dressing’ that serves a strategic purpose of mollifying public concerns’ (Slack, 2012: 179; see also Aras and Crowther, 2009; Fougère and Solitander, 2009). In other words, CSR talk would substitute real action. The co-existence claim of the empirical paradox proposition is rejected, while the normative benchmark is actually shared with the managerial paradigm: CSR communication has only one chance to become legitimate. It must be understood as a subordinate conduit (Axley, 1984) that needs to be aligned with practices ‘beyond’ communication.

The theoretical problem is that elements can be ‘made’ consistent only if they have been distinguished beforehand. From a CCO perspective, that means that a talk vs. action paradox would also be denied simply because the distinction would not be made in advance (see Table 5). Communication is instead conceptualized as a social practice, making it impossible to measure the degree of corporate ‘greenwashing’. For example, a CCO perspective would reject a research design aiming to scrutinize a car manufacturer’s alignment of talk and action by comparing their CSR communication with the ‘real’ CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of the vehicles. The recent Volkswagen scandal dramatically revealed the epistemological problems of such a design. The research would not compare indicators of ‘real’ environmental responsibility with ‘communicated’ environmental responsibility, it would not compare practice with communication, but instead communication with communication (Christensen and Cheney, 2013) - and communication is always, and on all levels, open to manipulation (Boje et al., 2006). Accordingly, instead of validating or falsifying the consistency claim, it would be much more insightful to explore how ventriloquists can successfully make their communicative figures appear more factual (such as e.g. emission statistics or CSR certificates) than other figures (e.g. claims in a CSR report).

**Table 5. Talk vs. action paradox**

	<b>Managerial perspective</b>	<b>Critical perspective</b>	<b>Communicative perspective</b>
Empirical paradox proposition: <b>Co-existence</b>			No theoretical separation of both elements
Normative paradox proposition: <b>Equal value</b>			
Relational paradox proposition: <b>Contradiction</b>			
Paradox is...	...denied.	...denied.	...denied.

### **Harmony and consistency: functions and strategies of managerial paradox denials**

The qualitative meta-analysis showed a broad and implicit tendency of mainstream discourses not to accept, but to deny paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility. The following two sections aim for a theoretical synthesis. I will first interpret from a constitutive perspective the rationale of managerial paradox denials before looking at the reasoning behind critical paradox denials.

Managerial research primarily denies CSR paradoxes by rejecting the *relational paradox proposition*. The assumption of organizational contradictions is replaced with the claim of organizational consistency and harmony. This is most salient in the application of a win-win figure in order to reconcile the ethical case and the business case of CSR. Similarly, a potential paradox of intrinsic and extrinsic CSR motives disappears in light of an overall instrumental rationality. The *normative paradox proposition* is also called into question. The explicit communication of discretionary activities is devalued, since this would violate the consistency claim of integrated CSR. Overall, it is possible to extract three main paradox-denying figures from the managerial discourse:

- The *win-win figure* accepts both the *empirical* and the *normative paradox proposition*, but rejects the *relational paradox proposition*. The paradox as a contradictory relationship is replaced with mutually supportive elements.
- The *mean-ends figure* accepts the *empirical paradox proposition*, but rejects both the *normative* and the *relational paradox proposition*. The contradictory relationship is replaced with an instrumental relationship. This goes along with the upvaluing of the ‘higher’ end, while the mean is reduced to a social tool.
- The *action-speaks-louder-than-words figure* accepts the *empirical paradox proposition* but rejects both the *normative* and the *relational paradox proposition*: CSR communication should be aligned with CSR action, and, ultimately, it is the latter that provides value.

The figures indicate that managerialism finds the potential contradictory nature of organizational relations disturbing: ‘Ignorance and denial might therefore be the most comfortable solution for an actor because it creates an illusion of consistency.’ (Ehnert, 2009: 154-155) The paradox denying figures are stabilized through leveling strategies of *corporate culturism* and *integrated communication* (Willmott, 1993). They take effect as ‘mediatory myths’ (Abravanel, 1983; Scheid-Cook, 1988) constituted by ‘discourses of transcendence’ (Abdallaj et al., 2011). A myth is a hermetic communicative construct that fulfills an ideological function. It ‘organizes a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth, a world open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes blissful clarity’ (Barthes, 1972: 143).

However, it is a situated clarity that allows its meaning to change depending on the expectations of the specific audience. For example, the mean-ends figure leaves open what and when something is communicated as a mean or as an end (Luhmann, 1968). When performing in front of shareholders, CSR can be positioned as a mean that boosts reputation and, ultimately,



sales. When performing in front of critical stakeholders, profitability could appear as a means of allowing the company to fulfill its responsibility as a corporate citizen committed to serving society as a whole. CSR is upvalued when it is defined as an end in itself; it has less value when it is presented as the means serving the business case. Ironically, the functionality of the figure builds on a reverse instrumental logic. It is the upvalued end that serves the downvalued mean: The end is transformed into an instrument justifying the existence of the mean. Accordingly, one option fundamental to Max Weber's conception of paradoxes (Symonds and Pudsey, 2008) must be excluded for the sake of consistency: the possibility that the mean might undermine the end. Turnable mean-end figures strategically replace 'mean-ends decoupling' which would be 'the simultaneous appearance of conflicting forms of rationality within an organization' (Bromley and Powell, 2012: 498).

Thus, the discursive power of managerial paradox denials lies in its twofold functionality: on the one hand, they provide consistent and clear *mediatory myths* about the corporation in harmony with itself and the outside world, while on the other hand leaving room for all kinds of *doublethink* (El-Sawad et al., 2004) and *ambiguity* (Eisenberg, 1984). Against this background, I assume two main goals of managerial paradox denials: (a) legitimizing the management through consistent messages and (b) securing contingency in corporate decision-making. Painful reflections on paradoxical dilemmas are replaced by affirmative free choices. 'Right versus right' dilemmas (Badaracco, 1997) are interpreted as the right always to be right. Such corporate arbitrariness is possible, because the paradox 'only emerges on the level of second-order observation' (Luhmann, 2005: 91). Life is easier for the first-order observer, who simply destroys the paradox by deciding the undecidable (von Foerster, 1992; see also Andersen, 2003). Self-reflexive paradox management is replaced with a contingent *affirmation* – the manager as

the all-inclusive yea-sayer capable of applying Nietzsche's *will to power* (1968) in a self-constituted and dilemma-free corporate world. In consequence, the paradox-denying figures supporting their affirmative role must be both legitimating and non-deterministic when it comes to management decisions.

### **Hypocrisy and cynicism: Functions and strategies of critical paradox denials**

The positivistic tendency to upvalue 'real' CSR practices and to devalue communication is also a characteristic of traditional critical CSR research. However, in contrast to managerialism, paradoxes are not replaced by harmonistic corporate worlds. Instead, the concurrent rejection of the *empirical* and the *normative paradox proposition* allows for the constitution of an overall rhetoric-vs.-practice figure. Organizations are talked into hypocrisy (Slack, 2012):

- Rejection of *motive paradox*: Managers are driven primarily by extrinsic motives, even though extrinsic motives are less legitimate than intrinsic motives.
- Rejection of *effects paradox*: Managers are committed primarily to the business case of CSR, even though the business case is less legitimate than the ethical case.
- Rejection of *practice paradox*: Managers primarily apply discretionary CSR practices, even though discretionary CSR practices are less legitimate than integrated CSR practices.
- Rejection of *communication paradox*: Managers engage in either non-credible explicit CSR communication or in non-transparent implicit CSR communication, but neither is legitimate.
- Rejection of *talk vs. action paradox*: Managers engage primarily in CSR talk, even though 'action speak louder than words'.

The way that critical CSR research deals with potential paradoxes is the same in all of these cases: at least one element in the relationship is delegitimized (rejection of the *normative paradox proposition*), while remaining legitimate elements are talked into empirical

nonexistence (rejection of the *empirical paradox proposition*). This allows a gap between ideal and reality to be constructed on all levels as a paradigmatic figure. The paradox is transformed into organizational hypocrisy: One figure is legitimate but not existent, the other figure is existent but not legitimate. Indeed, in the case of explicit and implicit communication, both figures are delegitimized, again demonstrating a general suspicion towards any corporate CSR communication. An 'unholy alliance' of positivism and normative research fails to recognize the potential paradoxical value of corporate hypocrisy (Brunsson, 2003). Instead, the hypocrisy figure ventriloquized by the critical CSR researcher ventriloquizes back and determines future research. It 'seals off' into a paradigm and results in a persistent cynicism towards CSR narratives (Willmott, 1993). Kuhn and Deetz (2008) claim that critical CSR research can - and should - go beyond such a cynical reasoning. Replacing hypocrisy figures with paradox figures that account for the normative complexity of organizational tensions could be one important step in that direction.

## **Conclusions**

It seems inevitable that an organizational theory highlighting the performative character of communication focuses on how organizational realities are constituted, but not denied. However, communication is also capable of talking something into nonexistence. I exemplified this idea by applying a ventriloquist approach to potential paradoxes of Corporate Social Responsibility. The story of the organization as a paradoxical entity exposed to structural tensions may or may not be told by a ventriloquized dummy. This dummy is not a communication channel, it is a reality in itself: its figures are brought to life not *through* communication, but *as* communication. Once they develop into an accepted social structure, they will be capable of ventriloquizing their own creator.

The ventriloquist perspective has been applied to potential CSR paradoxes in order to show that any discussion about paradox management first requires an in-depth investigation of its antecedent: the communicative constitution or denial of paradoxes. A paradox needs to be accepted before it can be managed. My meta-analysis of academic CSR discourses contributes to such a theoretical expansion in the following ways:

- I determined three propositions which need to be claimed simultaneously in order to constitute a paradox: (1) the co-existence of two elements as the *empirical paradox proposition*, (2) the legitimacy of both elements as the *normative paradox proposition*, (3) the contradiction between the elements as the *relational paradox proposition*.
- I extracted five prominent item pairs from CSR literature which might or might not be constituted as a paradoxical relationship: (a) intrinsic or extrinsic CSR motivations, (2) CSR effects supporting the business case or the ethical case, (3) integrated or discretionary CSR practices, (4) implicit or explicit CSR communication, (5) CSR talk or CSR action.

The meta-analysis shows that both managerial and critical CSR research talk these potential paradoxes into nonexistence. It is instead the ‘third way’, the constitutive view on organizations, which allows the CSR item pairs to ventriloquize as paradoxical figures. There is only one exception: the talk vs. action distinction does not form a paradox, because the constitutive view overcomes the positivistic separation of both elements: communication *of* practice is replaced by communication *as* practice.

Overall, this article is the first to combine a communication-centered CSR perspective with a tension-centered paradox perspective. It contributes to a better understanding of how and why mainstream CSR discourses still do not accept, but reject paradoxical figures. Managerial paradox denials work as ambiguous mediatory myths and replace organizational tensions with

consistency and harmony in order to legitimate management decisions without determining them. Critical scholars, in turn, reject paradoxes by complaining about gaps between ideal and reality, between rhetoric and practice. Their hypocrisy figure contributes to a unifying paradigm of critical CSR research and work as a catch-all conclusion for a variety of research topics. A communication theory contributing not to the denial, but to the constitution of CSR paradoxes offers an alternative: It builds on the intriguing theoretical idea that equally legitimate elements might nevertheless constitute a contradiction. It offers a theoretical framework that accounts for dynamic organizational tensions created by ‘the firm as a multi-purpose venture’ (Crane et al., 2014: 145).

The exploration of theoretical figures allowing CSR paradoxes to be denied or constituted could inspire future empirical research on organizational communication. I would assume that perceptions of practitioners and stakeholders mirror the academic cleavage identified. Managers probably utilize the functional value of paradox denials and find mediatory myths attractive. Critical stakeholders are likely to be more attracted by hypocrisy figures. The former might result in rather defensive conflict avoidance strategies, whereas the latter could lead to cynicism. However, there might also be contexts supporting the communicative constitution of organizational paradoxes, in which case a comparative analysis would be most instructive. Are organizations better off in the long term if they communicate paradoxes and deal with them in a reflexive proactive way? We would assume so, because an inclusive *management* of organizational tensions is not possible without a prior self-reflexive *naming* of these tensions. While naming may sound like a simple task, this analysis exemplifies how much sophisticated communication effort goes into paradox denials. It encourages empirical paradox research not to speed up, but to slow down: Before discussing paradox management strategies, we first need to

understand how corporate ventriloquists are opening or closing doors for such management. Thus, future research will particularly benefit from the ‘linguistic turn’ in social theory. For example, Austin’s (1962) distinction of illocution and perlocution could help us to understand how speech acts constitute or deny the motives and the effects paradox. A communicative paradox theory enables research designs which account more systematically for the role of power in academic and professional discourses. This article utilized the twofold potential of the constitutive perspective: first and foremost, the meta-analytical deconstruction and reconstruction of academic CSR discourses and, second, the development of a theoretical alternative.

Moreover, the conceptualization of paradox as proposed in this article could also contribute to the further development of the ventriloquist perspective. The three paradox propositions, introduced as indicators for the constitution or denial of paradoxes, may be applied to a theoretical relationship that is central to the ventriloquist approach. The link between the ventriloquist and the figure of the dummy could be positioned as a theoretical ‘meta-paradox’:

- *Empirical paradox proposition:* The ventriloquist and the figure coexist. The figure is a social reality separate from the ventriloquist - it is a social structure, not merely the ‘fluff’ of an unreal dummy.
- *Normative paradox proposition:* The figure develops a life of its own and therefore also develops in its own right. It contributes to a structure that enables the ventriloquist to proceed with the constitution of figures. This reflects the recursivity of social processes making all of the elements involved legitimate and indispensable.
- *Relational paradox proposition:* Following Cooren (2010), I highlighted the potential of the figure to ventriloquize its ventriloquist. There would be no need for such a backward move if

the figure were from the outset a perfect and consistent representation of the ventriloquist. In other words, a dynamic tension between ventriloquist and figure is the precondition for recursivity to occur: The ventriloquists are ventriloquized by the communicative figures they ventriloquize.

Post-positivistic CSR approaches beyond the scope of managerial and traditional critical research are especially well-suited to developing the theoretical idea of the ventriloquized ventriloquist further. One of these is ‘aspirational talk’ as proposed by Christensen et al. (2013). They introduce the concept as an alternative to critical CSR hypocrisy figures. ‘Aspirational talk’ of managers in the field of CSR should not be measured against ‘real’ corporate practices, and ought instead to be valued as a self-committing performative ambition for the future. The more companies talk publicly about contested responsibilities, the greater pressure they would be under to comply with them. Thus, aspirational talk neither stands for a cynical acknowledgment of organizational hypocrisy, nor does it replace communicative tensions with an arbitrary managerial affirmation. Instead, it allows for the investigation of the degree to which the tension between ventriloquist on the one hand, and aspirations as ventriloquized figures on the other, has the potential to induce creative organizational learning processes enabling formerly disregarded elements of a denied paradox to be talked into existence. Aspirational talk cannot, and should not, resolve the ventriloquist-figure paradox once and for all, because then inspiring points of friction would also be lost: ‘The gap between current and aspirational reality therefore is a paradoxical resource: it must simultaneously be reduced and expanded.’ (Christensen et al., 2011: 466-467) In other words, it is the dynamic tension between ventriloquist and figure that keeps both of them alive and pushes them in new directions. This is the potential a communication theory of organizational paradoxes has to offer. Paradox denials serve to ‘think

oneself out of a problem' (Beech et al., 2004: 1329). The communicative constitution of paradoxes instead confronts us with organizational tensions and provides an opportunity to deal with them in a reflexive and creative way.

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