Does Business and Society Scholarship Matter to Society? Pursuing a Normative Agenda with Critical Realism and Neoinstitutional Theory

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ABSTRACT. To date, B&S researchers have pursued their normative aims through strategic and moral arguments that are limited because they adopt a rational actor behavioral model and firm-level focus. I argue that it would be beneficial for B&S scholars to pursue alternate approaches based on critical realism (CR) and neoinstitutional theory (IT). Such a shift would have a number of benefits. For one, CR and IT recognize the complex roots of firm behavior and provide tools for its investigation. Both approaches also note the importance of social context and IT, in particular, points to tangible sites where changes in (and outcomes of) corporate practices can be assessed. CR also has an emancipatory ethos which harkens a role for scholars in social change, while IT provides mechanisms to ground this ethos in tangible activities that go beyond appealing to managers' strategic or moral sensibilities.

KEY WORDS: critical realism, institutional theory, social responsibility

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, there has been considerable hand-wringing among organizational scholars concerning the relevance of research to practice (Rynes, 2007). As a sub-field within organizational research, business and society (B&S) scholarship is implicitly included in these discussions. However, while there is little doubt that the gap between research and management practice applies to B&S scholarship, many who work in the area also aspire to grander aims, namely, to make a difference to society (Swanson, 1995, 1999; Wood, 1998, 2000). To this end, diverse streams of literature have emerged around topics related to social responsibility, social performance, corporate citizenship, social responsiveness, corporate environmentalism, critical strategy, stakeholder management, and others (Garriga and Melé, 2004). Despite this extensive literature, growing legitimacy within business schools, and journals dedicated to B&S issues (Wood, 2000), the efficacy of the field's normative aims is rarely considered (Jones, 1996). In the wake of resurgent debate about the contribution that business scholars might make to society (see Rynes, 2007) my paper asks 'does business and society scholarship matter to society'?

I argue that normative B&S scholarship is limited by its position *vis-à-vis* the economic view of the firm. Bolstered by legislation which explicitly states the profit making imperative of public firms (e.g., *Dodge Brothers v. Ford Motor Company*, 1919), economics has become the dominant paradigm in business practice and scholarship (Hinings and Greenwood, 2002; Margolis and Walsh, 2003). For economists, the primary purpose of the firm is wealth creation and managers (corporations) are assumed to act rationally (if boundedly so) based on financial considerations (Williamson, 1985). B&S scholars generally cede these points and, though they may disagree with its desirability, accept the economic paradigm as a practical fact.

There are two broad approaches B&S scholars have taken in pursuit of their normative aims. Strategic arguments make common cause with economics and try to show causal links between social responsibility and profitability. Moral arguments take on the economic paradigm more directly and argue that firms should be guided by principles that recognize the value of responsibility regardless of its financial implications. While these approaches have

catalyzed the attention and efforts of B&S scholars, both accept that firms are economic profit maximizers; economic behavioral assumptions take the place of detailed investigations into good and bad acts and firm-level decision-making is seen as the site to affect change (see Windsor, 2001). As such, extant approaches are mechanically impoverished and analytically misaligned with respect to their normative aims. I argue that neither offers compelling mechanisms to link their arguments to firm behavior and the focus on firm-level correctives manifests in blanket solutions that lack practical context, have tenuous links to social benefit, and offer limited means to assess efficacy.

I contend that B&S scholars would benefit from breaking with the economic paradigm and embrace theoretical approaches which provide a cultural lens on corporate behavior. Contra economics, cultural perspectives suggest that organizations are embedded in social environments that confer legitimacy on practices which need not be related to financial concerns (e.g., DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). From this view, socially beneficial practices result from forces that legitimize them as 'the way things are done (or should be done),' rather than products of an ongoing cost/benefit calculus (Campbell, 2007; Hoffman, 1997, 1999). A cultural approach also eschews easy assumptions about the link between profit maximization and socially harmful acts. While greed certainly may be to blame, more complex causality – and a broader array of suspects – should be considered.

Two prominent theoretical traditions consistent with a cultural perspective are critical realism (CR) and neoinstitutional theory (IT). Research which draws on these may help to invigorate the normative aims of B&S scholarship. In particular, CR and IT locate firm behavior within delimited but causally complex social contexts (or fields) and this provides a useful lens to study socially beneficial and harmful corporate practices, the mechanisms which rouse them, and the outcomes they produce. Moreover, by embracing an emancipatory edict and casting light on the multiplex actors and mechanisms at play within fields, CR and IT come together in ways that point to opportunities for B&S scholars to contribute to social good beyond advancing arguments that appeal to the strategic or moral sensibilities of corporate decision-makers.

The aims and tactics of business and society scholars

Like most academics, B&S scholars aspire to excel in research, teaching, and publishing (Wood, 2000). Yet, the field is unique within business schools because it also cherishes a passion for working to make the world a better place (Wood, 1998, p. 37). Put succinctly, Swanson claims that "the mission of the business and society field is to find and develop a constructive business relationship with society" (1999, p. 506). Wood also states that "despite the political, religious, and cultural differences among B&S scholars, I would be bold enough to say that virtually all of us are in this field because of a deep-seated desire to use our talents and gifts to make the world a better place" (2000, p. 368). While the desire to affect social good undoubtedly varies, normative aims are at the fore of efforts to establish the strategic or moral value of responsible behavior – the primary leverage points used by B&S scholars in pursuit of the field's normative aims.

Strategic approaches

Taking its lead from strategic management, a prominent area of B&S scholarship examines the financial implications of social responsibility. Like most strategy literature, a key aim is to show positive inflections in firm performance. In B&S scholarship, however, strategic approaches are also significantly motivated by a tacit assumption that firms will act responsibly if it increases (or at least does not reduce) profits (see Rowley and Berman, 2000; Wood and Jones, 1995). Here, the path from research to social good relies on the promise of profits to either motivate responsible decisions or unlock pro-social tendencies that are suppressed under wrong-headed assumptions that dichotomize economic and social objectives.

B&S scholars have a long history of using economics to justify social responsibility. Initially, authors took a moral tone, arguing that firms should be obliged to behave responsibly. These arguments were rationalized, however, based on a rubric of enlightened self-interest. For example, Bowen defined social responsibility as "the obligation of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those

decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives of our society" (1953, p. 6). Still, this was supported with claims that a firm would benefit in the long run because responsibility aids efficiency and government relations. In like manner, Davis (1960, 1973) argued that corporations are powerful social institutions that must avoid abusing their power. Again, Davis rationalized this by arguing that responsible acts "have a good chance of bringing long-run economic gain to the firm" (1960, p. 70). Work by Eells and Walton (1974), Johnson (1971), and Steiner (1971) all deploy similar arguments to justify responsibility as enlightened self-interest.

Although prominent in early B&S scholarship, moral overtones waned against the cries of economists who argued that corporations are fundamentally economic entities and that the path to social good is best secured through wealth creation. B&S arguments were criticized as inchoate and social investments were considered inappropriate – perhaps even a perversion of capitalism (Friedman, 1970; Levitt, 1958). Faced with this assault on the legitimacy of their research agenda, the efforts of many B&S scholars shifted toward developing a case for social responsibility that was compatible with the economic paradigm (Windsor, 2001). To this end, some authors examined the link between positive acts and financial outcomes. For example, work that is consistent with the limited view of corporate citizenship argues that some types of philanthropy enhance profits (Matten and Crane, 2005; Saiia et al., 2003). Others focused on the financial impacts of irresponsible behavior, arguing that illegal, immoral, and scandalous acts suppress profits (Frooman, 1997, 1999; Stoll, 2008).

A large body of empirical work also examines the relationship between a firm's financial performance and its overall social responsibility. One tactic has been to show that a firm's good and bad acts affect financial performance through intangible assets – such as reputation – which sharpen a firm's identity, enhance stakeholder loyalty (Fombrun, 1996; Gardberg and Fombrun, 2006), or reduce downside risk (Godfrey, 2005). Similar arguments have been advanced based on instrumental stakeholder theory. From this view, a firm will perform better if it balances the interests of employees, shareholders, communities, customers, and other groups that it

relies on (Bowie, 1988; Clarkson, 1995). A number of studies have used stakeholder theory to model social responsibility and its relationship with financial performance (e.g., Ogden and Watson, 1999; Waddock and Graves, 1997). Others have examined how social responsibility affects the ways in which individual stakeholder groups such as employees (Turban and Greening, 1997), customers (Marin et al., 2008), and shareholders (Johnson and Greening, 1999) act toward a firm.

Moral approaches

Rather than encouraging responsibility by linking it to profits, moral arguments draw on ethical thinking to inform their normative aims. Work in this tradition encompasses multiple philosophical traditions that are critical of the economic paradigm. Many also advance alternate views of the firm which eschew the singular pursuit of profits in favor of an ethos that values socially beneficial practices intrinsically. Here the link between scholarship and social good relies on the persuasive power of morally grounded arguments to tip managerial decision-making in favor of moral right regardless of its financial implications.

Some authors have taken a critical postmodern stance working to expose and critique the outcomes of profit-maximization. For example, Boje et al. (2004) argued 'cowboy capitalism' contributed to the Enron scandal. Others have shown how supposedly good practices such as self-managing teams and total quality management bring about new forms of oppression (Barker, 1993;[1] Boje and Windsor, 1993). Still others highlight the limits of economic reasoning as a frame for a firm's interactions with its stakeholders (Welcomer et al., 2000).

In addition to using postmodernism to expose hidden workings of power and paradoxical outcomes of 'good' practices, B&S scholars have dedicated considerable energy to advancing alternatives to the economic paradigm. As Garriga and Melé note, this work typically includes appeals to "principles that express the right thing to do or the necessity to achieve a good society" (2004, p. 60). For example, social contract theory argues that firms should act according to guidelines that are implicitly drawn up by society members. Here, a set of meta-principles

define the limits for acceptable corporate action (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994, 1999). Others argue that firms have a responsibility to address the interests of all the groups that they affect irrespective of financial implications. Rawlsian principles (Phillips, 1997), Kantian capitalism (Bowie, 1991), and theories of property and distributive justice (Donaldson and Preston, 1995) have all been used to justify this basic argument. Critical strategy research goes a step further and argues that all stakeholders should be considered legitimate participants in discussions about a firm's strategy (Shrivastava, 1986; Ulrich, 1996). This work argues the harmful effects of economic rationality can be alleviated with 'ideal speech' where free dialog amongst a firm and its stakeholders leads to mutual agreement about how the firm should act (Alvesson and Willmott, 1995).

The limitations of prevailing approaches

Although B&S scholars have deployed a wide range of strategic and moral arguments in pursuit of their normative aims, I argue that these have substantial limitations. Whether economics is enlisted as an ally (strategic approaches) or foe (moral approaches), B&S scholars tacitly accept that managers (corporations) are rational and opportunistic actors who singularly pursue financial self-interest. This assumption obscures the more complex roots of corporate behavior. Further, by locating the sources of good and bad acts inside the firm, managerial decision-making becomes the primary site where extant approaches seek to affect change (Windsor, 2001). Still, neither strategic nor moral approaches provide compelling mechanisms to link their arguments to corporate practice. A focus on firm-level responsibility also creates problems for thinking about how extant approaches might translate into social good, as well as for assessing potential outcomes of the social responsibility that they advocate.

Understanding corporate behavior

Though they may take issue with the acceptability and social utility of the economic paradigm (as many moral arguments do), B&S scholars almost invariably follow economists in assuming that corporate actions are guided by managers who act rationally in the service of wealth creation. Indeed, the rationale for arguing that responsibility is compatible with profits, or that responsibility should be valued intrinsically, is based on an assumption that the economic paradigm reflects the practical reality of business. In adopting an economic conception, however, B&S scholars end up with a narrow view on the roots of corporate behavior.

The economic paradigm *does* offer a useful, if limited, mechanism for explaining irresponsible practices. Agency theory (Eisenhardt, 1989), political economy (Crouch and Streeck, 1997), transaction cost economics (Williamson, 1985), and others all hold that actors work to aggrandize their financial interests regardless of the externalities that this might create. Indeed, there is ample evidence of financial opportunism in bad corporate behavior. Commentators on the collapse of Enron (McLean and Elkind, 2004), the addition of melamine to Chinese milk and North American pet foods (Barboza and Barrionuevo, 2007), and the sub-prime mortgage scandal (Blackburn, 2008) have all pointed the finger at profit–maximization. More generally, the pursuit of economic self-interest has been linked to practices such as pollution, layoffs, and sweatshop labor (Daneke, 1985; Wood, 1998).

Still, the notion that irresponsible acts stem from greed and opportunistic action should be viewed as a starting point rather than a blanket explanation. Financial self-interest may be a factor in many bad practices, but it is simplistic to assume it is the only one. Practices such as· sinking oil platforms in the ocean (Jensen, 2003), the preferential hiring and treatment of male employees (e.g., Etzkowitz et al., 2000), or cavalier safety regulations (e.g., Gephart, 1997) cannot reasonably be traced back to economic factors alone. The roots of these problems may also include paternalism, professional norms, sexism, routines that normalize bad acts, or others (See Etzkowitz et al., 2000; Gephart, 1997 for discussions). It is also simplistic to assume that all the relevant factors operate within a firm. While B&S scholars recognize the influence of legal apparatus,[2] practices may also be shaped by beliefs and norms that operate amongst firms (Scott, 2008) and within relational networks (Davis, 1991; Uzzi, 1997). Still, contextual factors have not been integrated into strategic or moral arguments where authors are more

interested in offering correctives than analyzing the causal undercurrents of the problems which they address (with the exception of critical postmodern B&S scholarship).

Economic assumptions also provide very little insight into the source of responsible acts. As many scholars have noted, if firms are rational value-maximizers there should be no social responsibility in the first place (e.g., Margolis and Walsh, 2003; Marquis et al., 2007). Still, many firms make social investments that are not solely driven by financial considerations – a fact that led Margolis and Walsh (2003) to appeal for research into the origins of social initiatives. Neither strategic nor moral arguments offer much insight, however. The explanatory value of strategic arguments fails for non-instrumental social investments and moral approaches largely overlook questions of why firms *actually do* behave responsibly. Despite this lack of interest in the causal roots of social responsibility (however defined), both approaches aspire to affect its implementation within firms (Rowley and Berman, 2000; Swanson, 1999).

Linking B&S scholarship with corporate action

The potential for either strategic or moral approaches to deliver societal benefit is contingent on its ability to motivate corporate behavior in line with its prescriptions. I argue, however, that there are problems with assuming the financial and ethical mechanisms at the heart of strategic and moral approaches, respectively, are productive levers to affect firm behavior. I critique the unique limitations of strategic and moral approaches individually and then highlight some common weaknesses.

Strategic arguments and financial mechanisms
The central mechanism linking strategic arguments to social good is the espoused link between responsible behavior and financial return (Rowley and Berman, 2000; Wood and Jones, 1995). Over 100 studies using a wide range of social responsibility and financial performance measures have investigated this relationship (Margolis and Walsh, 2003). While meta-analysis suggests that the overall link between the two is positive (Orlitzky et al., 2003), the issue is far from settled. Indeed, there seems to be an endless supply of studies that highlight weaknesses

in earlier work and advocate refined measures and methods with the supposed potential to 'finally settle the debate' (see Margolis and Walsh, 2003). Far from providing clarity, the result is an increasingly tangled thicket of studies and findings which make it unclear how the corpus of strategic B&S arguments might motivate corporate action.

Despite the fact that many studies have found a positive relationship between social and financial performance, we lack meaningful knowledge of how and why this is the case. One complication is that there are a wide variety of ways to define social responsibility and these are used inconsistently in strategic arguments (Garriga and Melé, 2004; Wood and Jones, 1995). Also, the dominant approach has been to draw out the broad contours of this relationship with large-scale quantitative research as opposed to in-depth study (Rowley and Berman, 2000). While it may be heartening to see regression models show positive inflections in financial performance, these provide little insight into what types of pro-social acts affect financial performance, in which direction, and in which contexts. Thus, strategic work fails to offer managers a clear or compelling set of prescriptions for adopting responsibilities that complement financial aims.

Further, strategic arguments lack moral force. Even if it could be established that responsible acts improve financial performance, there is no compelling reason for firms to pursue these over alternatives that might have similar effects. Moreover, casting responsibility as a financial concern subjugates its intrinsic value to instrumental outcomes (Margolis and Walsh, 2003). Acting for the social good becomes a 'can do' strategic proposition rather than a 'should do' or 'must do' (Clemens and Cook, 1999); a truly discretionary activity with no greater moral force than advertising, R&D, or even potentially harmful acts like outsourcing and downsizing. There is a possibility, however, that removing economic barriers will alleviate constraints on discretionary social responsibility and enable moral decision-making among managers (Wood, 1991). Still, in this context there is no imperative for managers to adopt responsibilities or continue with them when financial performance suffers. To wit, peripheral activities with tenuous links to financial performance, such as social investments, are typically the first victims of problem-driven simple search (Greve, 1998, 2003).

The force of strategic work is strongest in its focus on irresponsible acts. From an economic perspective, it seems obvious that firms would try to avoid behaving in ways that reduce profits. Thus, to the extent that studies show irresponsible acts affect profits, they provide plausible motivation for firms to avoid them. However, results in these studies are predicated on a causal chain that is mediated by public awareness and moderated by corporate spin. Evidence from impression management (Goffman, 1959), attribution theory (Heider, 1958), and corporate reputation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990) all suggest that individuals act based on perceptions, not objective reality. If a firm benefits from an irresponsible practice, evidence of such acts being punished may motivate cunning and manipulation as readily as changed behavior. Reflecting this, a growing number of firms now issue social responsibility reports which are self-laudatory (Holder-Webb et al., 2008) and employ impression management when discussing bad acts (Laufer, 2003). Social disclosures are also highest among firms and industries that are being criticized for poor social responsibility (Niskanen and Neiminen, 2001).

Moral arguments and ethical mechanisms
Moral arguments tacitly assume that firms will change how they act if given good reasons to do so. Yet, it is unclear how ethics might work as a mechanism to actually link moral scholarship to corporate behavior. Critical strategy, normative stakeholder, and social contract arguments all try to push an ethical lever to spur action and postmodern work eschews this in favor of critique.

Much of the extant postmodern B&S literature does a fine job of probing beneath the surface of reality to illuminate and criticize phenomena that might otherwise pass unexamined. However, as with other postmodern analyses, this work is much better at criticism than offering suggestions for how to bring about more productive outcomes (Calás and Smircich, 1999). Now, to be clear, I am not arguing postmodern approaches are not useful. Criticism is an important function of intellectuals (Foucault, 1982; Said, 1994), and any effect in terms of spurring thought and insight is welcome. There is a certain irony, however, in arguments that implicitly aspire to affect change but leave it to others to determine how this might be accomplished.

In critical strategy, normative stakeholder, and social contract arguments which advocate changed corporate practices, on complication is the variety of ethical traditions deployed. While different perspectives facilitate their own well-grounded moral prescriptions, the plurality of approaches creates an intellectual landscape littered with divergent and implicitly competing views. As Garriga and Melé note, "although each of these theories states universal principles, in practice, the global effect is one of unabashed relativism: 'If you are Utilitarian, you'll do this, if you are Kantian, you'll do that'" (2004, p. 65). Thus, while there may be broad agreement in moral arguments about the limitations of economic rationality, there is little agreement about what should be done to displace it. If B&S scholars themselves cannot present a unified set of moral prescriptions, the potential to influence managers seems faint.

Moreover, even if moral scholarship comprised a coherent set of propositions, the utility of ethics as a lever to affect corporate behavior is questionable. In essence, moral arguments seek to establish the primacy of ethics over economics. However, unlike institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008) and CR (Archer, 2002; Bhaskar, 1978) which point to a range of non-economic factors that motivate corporate action, moral B&S literature seems to offer little more than faith that managers will be persuaded by impassioned arguments about moral right. Discussion of the more tangible bases for this link is rare. Indeed, authors tend to revert to economics when rationalizing why firms should adopt morally based practices. For example, Dunfee (1998) argued that firms consent to the terms of a social contract because it is in their rational financial interest. Similarly, Fung (2003) argued that the considered engagement advanced in critical strategy work helps firms to avoid criticism and distinguish themselves from competitors. Scherer and Palazzo (2007) also asserted that firms which include stakeholders in their strategy development do so for strategic reasons. Thus, while there are many well-reasoned moral arguments for responsibility in B&S scholarship, the mechanisms that they offer either fall back on economics or have very tenuous links to corporate practice.

Intelligibility, analytic focus, and practical influence
Beyond limitations in the ways that B&S scholars try to use ethical or financial levers to affect corporate

behavior, there is a common issue with respect to the gap between scholarly research and managerial practice. Over the years concerns have been raised that academics do not engage with managers (Tushman and O'Reilly, 2007) and that managers do not take up research findings (Rynes, 2007). The issue of intelligibility is central to these arguments.

Moral arguments based on normative stakeholder and social contract perspectives deploy complex and dense prose when they invoke ethical justifications based on Aristotle, Kant, Rawls, and others. Critical strategy literature drawing on Habermas is similarly dense and difficult to understand, even amongst some academics (see Alvesson and Willmott, 1995 for a discussion). As such, moral B&S scholarship is particularly vulnerable to criticism that it operates in a closed loop where research is produced for, and consumed by, small groups of like-minded scholars (Hambrick, 1994). Also, even established areas of business scholarship are thought to have minimal effects on practice (Hambrick, 1994). Add to this the fragmented and contingent nature of strategic B&S arguments and it seems especially unlikely that they will influence managers. Indeed, evidence suggests B&S scholarship had little influence in the advent or diffusion of corporate citizenship; the most recent trend in responsibility practice amongst large firms (Matten et al., 2003).

Beyond this, a key weakness in linking extant arguments to firm behavior is an analytic focus that is simultaneously too broad and too narrow. Consistent with the economic paradigm, both strategic and moral approaches offer prescriptions about what 'firms' should do. This tactic is at once targeted to the behavior of individual firms and to an abstract, universal, firm. In some ways, this may contribute to the seductiveness of strategic approaches as a tool to affect firm behavior. In discussing issues of reputation (Fombrun and Shanley, 1990) or stakeholder management (Freeman, 1984), there is an implicit plasticity that invites firms to adopt practices and adapt them to their individual circumstances. Still, this 'adopt and adapt' approach reduces strategic B&S arguments to broad management philosophy rather than assiduously defined strategic perspectives. Further, large samples and regression models offer little insight into issues of practical implementation (Davis and Marquis, 2005). Without offering insight into how particular firms might deploy responsibility

for instrumental ends, strategic arguments cede much of their motivating rationale.

Moral arguments also target the behavior of individual firms without accounting for the exigencies of context. As with strategic approaches, there is a seductiveness to arguments about the intrinsic value of responsibility since they provide B&S scholars with a platform to critique extant arrangements and use broad brush strokes to paint alternatives. Recall that social contract work argues that firms should follow a set of principles that are defined by society (Donaldson and Dunfee, 1994, 1999) and that critical strategy and normative stakeholder arguments offer ethical principles to guide firm action (Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Shrivastava, 1986). However, blanket arguments of this type obscure questions of how ethical principles might translate into different contexts, how firms might balance these with economic pressures (Margolis and Walsh, 2003), or how the actions of exemplar firms (e.g., Scherer and Palazzo, 2007) might translate to different locales, industries, or strategic groups (Porter, 1980; Reger and Huff, 1983). Thus, extant arguments, be they based on economics or ethics, are bereft of context in ways that obscure their implications for practical implementation.

Linking social responsibility to social good

It is clearly problematic to assume that B&S scholarship affects firm behavior. Further, even if this assumption were to hold, there are problems with assuming that society would benefit from the social responsibility advocated by B&S scholars. In particular, a focus on firm-level phenomenon creates an analytic misalignment between extant approaches and social outcomes since it is unclear how we might assess the latter in meaningful ways by looking at individual firms or corporations writ large. Moreover, the dominant focus on firm behavior lends itself to problematic conceptualizations of responsibility in both strategic and moral approaches which obfuscate their links to socially beneficial outcomes.

Analytic misalignment and assessing social outcomes
Even if one were to grant that B&S arguments affect corporate behavior in ways that benefit society, it is

unclear how we might marshal evidence to assess this. As Clarkson states, "society [is] a level of analysis that is more inclusive, more ambiguous, and further up the ladder of abstraction than a corporation" (1995, p. 102). Accordingly, strategic and moral approaches provide numerous lines of distinction to differentiate responsible from irresponsible firms, but offer little insight into how these firms affect society. The unfortunate result is that 'business' has become the overwhelming focus of B&S literature, eliding meaningful engagement with 'society.'

Social responsibility (in whatever guise) is easy to talk about in the context of individual firms, but does not translate easily to societal outcomes. Among moral approaches, postmodern research focuses on singular examples of irresponsible behavior and the prescriptions offered in critical strategy, normative stakeholder, and social contract arguments locate responsibility within firms that adhere to ethical principles. A similar focus is evident in strategic work that advocates stakeholder management or social responsibility as a means to manage employees, customers, or others. In each instance, societal benefit becomes equated with the principles that guide action rather than the outcomes that an action produces; clearly problematic in terms of determining how social responsibility affects society.

Theoretically, amongst current approaches, it may be possible to examine the outcomes of a firm's stakeholder management or decisions based on critical strategy formation. These approaches provide an inventory of relevant stakeholders and detailed research could elicit the effects that various practices have on each. The key issue, however, is whether this effort is conceptually or practically scalable to broader levels of analysis. I object for two reasons. First, these approaches do not provide insight into what the appropriate level of analysis should be. 'Society' is a multifaceted and amorphous construct and is not a practical level of analysis (Bourdieu, 1984; Davis and Marquis, 2005). Second, as I discuss next, there are conceptual limitations with respect to how social responsibility is defined in extant approaches.

Strategic arguments and social good
Among strategic arguments, the linking apparatus between corporate action and social good is

responsible practice (however defined). Still, there are clear limitations with approaches that equate a single behavior such as corporate governance, donations, or employee relations with responsibility (see Wood and Jones, 1995 for a discussion). Likewise, work on corporate reputation shows that firms become known for particular types of behavior and may benefit from reputations that embody both good and bad acts (Carter and Deephouse, 1999). Some reputation studies utilize broader measures, but these typically integrate some sort of stakeholder model (e.g., Fombrun, 1996).

In many ways, stakeholder theory provides the most robust treatment of social responsibility amongst strategic approaches. Recall, this approach tacitly assumes that society will benefit from individual firms addressing and balancing the interests of instrumental stakeholders (Clarkson, 1995; Rowley and Berman, 2000). Such assumptions, however, are tenuous in practical settings and stakeholder management can have productive and/or harmful outcomes. For one, stakeholder groups may have widely divergent interests (Freeman, 1984). As such, addressing the interests of a specific group may benefit some group members but have harmful outcomes for others. For instance, Sport Utility Vehicles pollute more than almost any other vehicle but they address the interests of some consumers and demand for them remains despite rising gas prices (McLaughlin, 2008). Similarly, Wal-Mart pursues a low-price, high-volume strategy (Wal-Mart, 2008) which benefits many customers, shareholders, and suppliers but also raises concerns about the firm's union relations, regulatory compliance, and labor practices (KLD, 2008). Further, aggregating stakeholder relationships does not comprise an integrated responsibility variable (Rowley and Berman, 2000). Firms may have like levels of overall responsibility, but the contributing factors may be very different. It is unclear how such diverse activities which vary among firms might be aggregated up to ascertain social outcomes.

Strategic perspectives also fall short in terms of identifying how firms might balance competing stakeholder interests in the service of social good. Mitchell et al. (1997) argue that stakeholder groups have different combinations of urgency, power, and legitimacy, but only those which are high on the latter two are likely to receive firm attention.

Further, attending to the interests of these stakeholders alone may result in firms overlooking many groups that have urgent claims but limited means to affect the firm. For example, Wood noted that when Nike expanded globally, it "[rode] the wave of cheap labor and less restrictive manufacturing conditions in developing countries" (2000, p. 359). Despite its harmful effects, Nike continued to utilize this 'sweatshop' labor until it was criticized by powerful and legitimate stakeholders including some activists and the mass media (Wood, 2000).

Moral arguments and social good

As with strategic arguments, there are issues with linking the prescriptions embedded in moral arguments to social good. With respect to normative stakeholder theory, we have little insight into how a firm might balance the interests of all of its stakeholders in practical contexts. Even if it were possible to fully implement this approach, it may still bring about negative outcomes. The primary issue is that a firm-level focus overlooks larger systemic considerations. For example, European and North American countries use tax revenues to operate social programs and fund charitable organizations (Pierson, 1994). However, since about 1965, global tax competition and the growth of the tax shelter industry have eroded this tax base (Avi-Yonah, 2004). Tax competition allows firms to reduce their taxes while still meeting their legal obligations. Thus, it is possible for firms like Intel to donate increasing sums to charity (Intel, 2005) but contribute less dollars to society overall because it pays no tax on its non–US income (Avi-Yonah, 2004). Thus, even if it were possible for a firm to address the interests of all of its stakeholders on a micro-level, it may still contribute to macro-level issues like the crisis of the welfare state (Pierson, 1994).

Critical strategy work goes beyond normative stakeholder theory and offers prescriptions for how firms might consider the interests of diverse stakeholders, but it does so in a limited way. Recall, the argument is that when all groups are granted equal priority, dialog between a firm and its stakeholders should produce decisions which are agreeable to all parties (Alvesson and Willmott, 1995; Ulrich, 1996). As Scherer and Palazzo argue, however, "it seems naïve to assume that all coordination problems in the context of economic activities can be solved

in processes of argumentation that are oriented toward mutual understanding and agreement" (2007, p. 1105). This criticism is equally applicable to social contract arguments that assume it is possible for diverse groups in society to agree on a set of principles that define responsible corporate behavior (Dunfee, 1998). The interests of some groups are antithetical and some necessarily have more power than others. It is simplistic to think that all groups will be willing to compromise, that firms and their powerful stakeholders will be swayed by contrary arguments from weak groups, or that the resulting courses of action will simultaneously satisfy all opposing parties, let alone contribute to some broader social good.

Critical realist and neoinstitutional alternatives

In pursuing their normative aims, I argue that it would be beneficial for B&S scholars to pursue cultural approaches such as CR and neoinstitutional theory (IT) which are interested in understanding recurring patterns of action within delimited social contexts. This approach would have a number of benefits over strategic and moral arguments. For one, CR and IT take a multi-level view of reality that recognizes the complex roots of firm behavior and provide tools for its investigation. Both approaches also note the importance of social context and IT, in particular, points to tangible sites where changes in (and outcomes of) corporate practice might be assessed. By focalizing specific groups of firms, this approach also enables a shift from analyzing responsibility with idiosyncratic acts or composites of firm behavior to a focus on specific practices that persist among firms that are embedded in common environments.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that I am not arguing that questions related to firm-level behavior are unimportant. Attempts to understand how firms conceive of and act upon social responsibility are useful even if it is problematic to link extant efforts in this pursuit to normative efficacy. Still, my aim is not to offer correctives to existing arguments or to provide a competing definition of firm-level responsibility. Rather, I advocate a shift in the level of analysis. Clearly, this does not resolve

intra-firm issues related to stakeholder management, critical strategy formation, or the like. It is, however, a strategy that is more amenable to thinking about social outcomes and the forces that bring them about. To this end, the emancipatory edict of CR and the tangible mechanisms of social change offered in IT point to opportunities for B&S scholars to affect the social structures that embed corporate activity and thus contribute to social good beyond advancing arguments that appeal to mangers' strategic or moral sensibilities.

Understanding corporate action with critical realism and neoinstitutionalism

Unlike the simple model of causality in economics (Friedman, 1970; and see Friedland and Alford, 1991 for a discussion), CR and IT evoke a more nuanced view that embeds action in larger social structures (Archer, 2002; Thornton, 2004). This view highlights that firms exist in environments which rationalize behaviors that may or may not be linked to financial outcomes (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). To this end, CR and IT situate action within a stratified social ontology which shapes, but does not determine, a firm's interests and actions.[3] As Figure 1 shows, reality is divided into three domains that cannot be conflated but are ever-present, mutually informing, and constitute progressively deeper levels of reality (Bhaskar, 1978; Leca and Naccache, 2006).

The deepest level of reality consists of high-level and relatively enduring sets of beliefs which furnish the broad principles that shape actors' understandings of legitimate behavior. In CR, these 'structures' operate in 'the domain of real' (Bhaskar, 1978). In IT, the parallel concept to 'structure' is 'institutional logic.' First introduced by Friedland and Alford (1991), institutional logics are conceptualized as aggregates of meaning which are exogenous to actors but serve as templates that orient and justify action. In this way, structures/logics represent broad frameworks that have the potential to generate certain acts and make them meaningful (Bhaskar, 1978; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Examples of structures include paternalism, racism, stewardship, conservation, or even academic tenure. These operate in the background of social reality, but play an important role in shaping patterns of behavior in some con-

texts. For example, Leca and Naccache (2006) assert that 'measurement' is a structure with capacities to define, standardize, and make objects comparable – the authors show its influence in the French investment field. Neoinstitutionalists have also shown the influence of logics in various contexts. For example, Thornton and Ocasio (1999) showed how 'professional' and 'market' logics led to the valorization of different practices in higher education publishing. Lounsbury (2002, 2007) showed similar dynamics with respect to 'trustee' and 'growth' logics in the mutual fund field.

Structures/logics cannot be observed directly; rather their influence is read through the recurring and self-reinforcing patterns of action that they produce (Archer, 2000; Thornton, 2004). CR refers to this level of reality as the 'domain of actual' (Bhaskar, 1978; Sayer, 2000) and the equivalent concept in IT is 'institutions' (Scott, 2008). It is important to note that while structures/logics provide the broad orienting principles that shape institutions, they do not do so in a deterministic way. CR, in particular, argues that the domain of real comprises multiple structures that can interact, combine, and counteract each other in the domain of actual (Bhaskar, 1978). Accordingly, a particular structure/logic may have a strong influence in some settings but be absent, attenuated, or cancelled out in others (Archer, 2000).

Reflecting the variable influence of structures/logics and the potential for institutionalized patterns of action to be based on multiple structures, context is an important consideration for both CR and IT (Davis and Marquis, 2005; Tsoukas, 1994). While CR is somewhat vague in this regard, IT highlights the importance of 'fields' as a level of analysis. Fields comprise organizations, such as those situated in a community or industry, which share a common institutional environment and take each other into account as they engage in common pursuits (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Scott, 2008). The institutional environment that embeds these organizations includes multiplex groups such as suppliers, governments, social movements, professional associations, academics, and the organizations themselves (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 148). While this resembles a list of stakeholders, the focus is on how the actions of these groups cohere into broadly shared beliefs about how *sets of firms* should behave and the processes through which these expectations

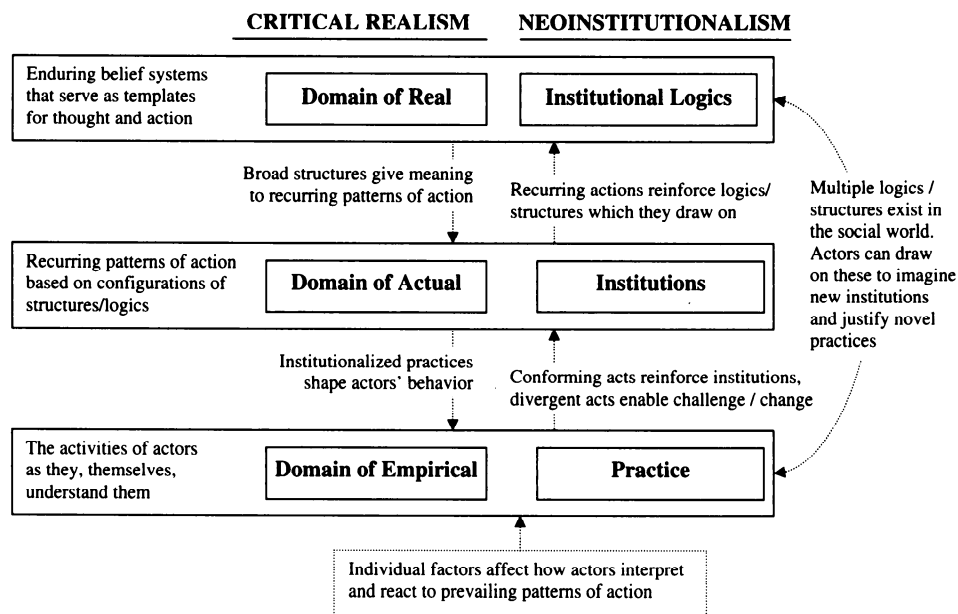**CRITICAL REALISM**   **NEOINSTITUTIONALISM**

Figure 1. Ontological domains in CR and IT and their interrelations.

become ingrained in firm behavior as the baseline through which rationality is assessed (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

The final level of reality in CR and IT consists of actions as they are understood by the actors themselves. This is called the 'domain of empirical' in CR and 'practice' in IT. At this level, actors ascribe meaning to their behavior, but they may not be fully aware of the structures/logics and institutions that shape it (Bhaskar, 1993; Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). Further, as reflected in Figure 1, action at this level can reinforce prevailing institutions (and their supporting structures/logics) or challenge them (Archer, 2000; Barley and Tolbert, 1997). In many cases, reproducing institutions takes little effort or conscious thought. Some institutions are so taken-for-granted that actors may act in concert without questioning their efficacy or legitimacy. The power of some structures/logics can also become so ingrained in particular institutions that alternate ways of acting become unthinkable for many actors (Friedland and Alford, 1991).

Still, the influence of higher levels of reality is not hydraulic. CR and IT both account for active agency in the domain of empirical/practice. Because the domain of real encompasses multiple structures/logics, actors can draw on these to criticize extant institutions, imagine new ones, and justify alternate

practices – though this may be met with considerable resistance (Archer, 2002; Rao et al., 2003). Actors also have unique histories, identities, and affiliations that affect how they perceive extant institutions and act in relation to them (Archer, 2002; Oliver, 1991). To the extent that acts which draw on alternate structures catalyze collective action they can, over time, undermine the power of existing institutions and bring about new practices which become entrenched in a field (Bhaskar, 1993; Hiatt et al., 2008; Rao et al., 2003). Thus, CR and IT account for persistence *and* change in practices and this makes them powerful tools for understanding the roots of firm behavior and processes that might bring about positive change.

Understanding 'good' and 'bad' corporate acts

The stratified ontology in CR and IT provides a rich framework for understanding corporate behavior. Contra economics, it calls for academics to peel back the layers of reality and expose the more complex sources of particular acts (Li et al., 2007; Selboe, 2002). Importantly, this goes beyond a focus on the here-and-now and emphasizes the need to ascertain the historical underpinnings of institutionalized practices (Archer, 1995). For example, Hoffman (1997, 1999) gives a detailed historical account of the rise of environmental practices in the chemical and

oil production fields. Here, conservation went from 'heresy to dogma' as a wide variety of actors worked to expose harmful practices, change regulations, and proffer correctives based on logics of conservation and stewardship. Similarly, Lounsbury et al. (2003) exposed the historical factors that spurred the adoption of recycling practices in the solid waste handling field. The story included multiple actors drawing on logics of charity, community, and stewardship in ways that helped to legitimate recycling as a desirable practice.

Further, CR and IT add nuance to the assumed economic roots of 'bad' practices. In particular, CR advocates a problem-driven approach based on identifying and understanding recurring bad acts. This strategy of 'retroduction' involves three stages: identifying recurring patterns of action, postulating structures/logics that, if they were to exist, would provide a causal explanation for the actions, and then subjecting explanations to empirical scrutiny (Ekstrom, 1992; Sayer, 1992). The approach explicitly asks for investigation into the diverse causes of bad acts. Financial concerns may be one factor, but harmful practices can integrate other structures/logics as well (e.g., Gephart, 1997; Jensen, 2003). Retroduction also sensitizes us to bad acts that are perpetuated through constellations of multiple actors, structures/logics, and institutions.

A wonderful example is work conducted by Etzkowitz et al. (2000) exploring the persistent marginalization of women in the field of academic science. The authors show how structures/logics related sexism, family roles, Mertonian science, and fraternalism co-mingle and become manifest in scientific education, graduate training, university and department policy, professional networks, and remuneration schemes. The result is a collection of institutionalized practices which persistently disadvantage female scientists. Further, the orienting question for this research forms the thrust of a broader research stream with a number of authors investigating narrower aspects of the problem. For example, Murray and Graham (2007) exposed how sexism, economics, and Mertonian science became institutionalized in venture capital practices which affected commercial opportunities for female life-scientists. Similar studies have investigated the marginalization of female scientists in contexts such as elite universities (Azoulay et al., 2009) and research

centers (Corley and Gaughan, 2005). Importantly, this corpus of research shows that the marginalization of women in science is a complex and multi-faceted problem encompassing many actors, structures/logics, and institutions.

A sophisticated understanding of a problem enables nuanced and insightful solutions to be conceived. Rather than arguing that gender discrimination can be addressed solely through financial incentives (as strategic B&S approaches might advocate) or by appreciating the intrinsic value of gender parity (as moral approaches might advocate), Etzkowitz et al. (2000, pp. 223–250) offer a suite of correctives. In addition to financial incentives based on gender equity, they advocate diversity reviews to formally assess the problem in individual universities, alternate bases for academic promotion, changes in scientific curricula, the creation of supportive material infrastructure including childcare, and the opening of professional networks through normative sanction or policy intervention. There may be considerable mileage for B&S scholars in pursuing this type of approach. Rather than assuming the causes of irresponsible acts and offering blanket solutions, a retroductive strategy facilitates nuanced and targeted propositions based on a deep understanding of the structural roots of harmful practices.

Academic influence in changing corporate practices

Understanding social change is a central focus of CR and is gaining prominence in IT. Both focus on how agentic action enables actors to transform institutionalized patterns of behavior. More precisely, there is a line of distinction between actions that are consistent with, and thus reinforce, extant institutions and those which deviate from them in the pursuit of change (Archer, 2002; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). CR holds that when actors become aware of the oppressive structures that underpin particular patterns of action, their harmful effects can be apprehended and efforts can be taken to institute practices based on more socially beneficial structures (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, 1993). Although the actual processes that drive change are somewhat vague in CR, IT identifies a number of mechanisms.

Davis and Marquis (2005, p. 336) detail the mechanisms which have been used to study how

practices change within a field. These include framing and evangelism (diagnosing social problems and promoting solutions), diffusion (the spread of practices, usually *via* networks), network cultivation (establishing links between like-minded actors), bricolage (assembling elements from diverse contexts to create new practices), and translation (packaging ideas and practices in ways that enable their flow between contexts). Numerous studies show how these mechanisms have been used to affect corporate behavior. For example, practices from the legal field were integrated into Canadian accounting (bricolage, translation) through arguments from like-minded firms (network cultivation) that the practices were necessary to ensure their competitiveness (framing, evangelism) (Greenwood et al., 2002). Authors have also shown how actors in the Twin-Cities argued for the benefits of generous giving (framing) and brought together managers interested in community stewardship (network cultivation), which facilitated the spread of this practice among local firms (diffusion) (Galaskiewicz, 1997; Guthrie, 2003).

In addition to highlighting some of the bases for changes in corporate behavior, CR and IT point to an active role for academics. A fundamental drive in CR is the pursuit of social change through scholarly research. The idea is that academics can spur change by identifying oppressive institutions and diagnosing their structural undercurrents (Bhaskar, 1993). While CR has been criticized for its failure to specify how, exactly, this might translate into social change (e.g., Willmott, 2005), IT mechanisms can help to ground this edict in tangible activities.

Framing plays a key role in enabling change by identifying harmful practices within a field and offering possible solutions. There are two aspects to framing – diagnostic and prognostic. Diagnostic framing highlights problematic practices, their impact, and the need for corrective action (Benford and Snow, 2000). For example, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson (1962) brought harmful practices in chemical field into the popular conscience and helped establish a rationale for change (Hoffman, 1999). In like fashion, community activists helped to catalyze the push for recycling in the solid waste handling field by illuminating the ecological impacts of earlier practices (Lounsbury et al., 2003).

The skills of B&S scholars are likely well suited to diagnostic framing. The motivation to contribute to social good (Swanson, 1995, 1999; Wood, 2000) may sensitize B&S researchers to look for persistent harmful practices within fields. University employment also provides a unique context that is amenable to the free thinking, critique, and in-depth study required to gain a nuanced understanding of institutionalized bad acts (Said, 1994). Moreover, working within universities means that B&S scholars occupy peripheral positions within fields populated by corporations. IT studies have shown that this location is particularly amenable to thinking about the limitations of current institutions and spurring processes for change (see e.g., Greenwood et al., 2002). To this end, a retroductive approach may be a powerful tool. In many ways, the study of women in science is a diagnostic framing project that would be difficult to undertake outside the academy (e.g., Etzkowitz et al., 2000) and a parallel approach could be taken to study any number of issues. For instance, in light of recent events, there may be strong prospects for studying the deep roots of harmful practices in the fields of American finance and Chinese food production. B&S scholars might also cast their gaze on more insidious practices such as male dominance in the professional services field (Kumra and Vinnicombe, 2008), recurring spills from oil pipelines (Wry, 2006), or others. This endeavor might be enriched by engaging with critical and postmodern scholars who make it their mission to surface harmful practices that might pass unnoticed otherwise (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott, 1995; Boje and Windsor, 1993).

In addition to diagnosing the causes of social problems, B&S scholars might find a meaningful role in advancing potential solutions. Prognostic framing involves theorizing a desired future state and a path to achieve it (Benford and Snow, 2000). Here, B&S scholars could utilize bricolage and translation to conceive of alternate arrangements based on bits and pieces of successful practice in other contexts. This pursuit is particularly well suited to academics because they have wide gait to imagine how alternate structures/logics might enable more socially beneficial practices. Scholars are also a cosmopolitan and diverse group who study a range of phenomenon in a range of contexts. As such, there may be opportunities for B&S scholars to gain exposure to beneficial practices that operate beyond a focal field through their professional networks and theorize

their import (e.g., Phillips and Tracey, 2007). Scholars also have freedom to promote correctives that may not be available to other actors. Processes of institutional change can resemble wars where groups contest the legitimacy of practices and the actors who advocate them (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2006). Whereas these struggles can have dire consequences for those who challenge powerful actors and entrenched institutions (see Lounsbury et al., 2003), academic tenure gives scholars some protection (Said, 1994). 'Science' is also a powerful logic that gives academic research an aura of legitimacy that lends itself to practical influence (Friedland and Alford, 1991). As such, B&S scholars may have a role as catalysts and advisors in efforts to change corporate practices. To wit, academic research played a key role in the framing of environmental issues by social movements (Sine and Lee, 2009) and politicians (Sweet, 2006).

Another purpose of framing is to cultivate networks. Networks play an important role in changing business practice because they serve as a conduit for collective action (Stryker, 1980) and enable the diffusion and institutionalization of practices (Davis, 1991). Frames that resonate with multiple groups pave the way for linkages to emerge among them. For example, an environmental stewardship frame enabled activists to build a network of students, professionals, and administrators in support of university recycling (Lounsbury, 2001). Guthrie (2003) has also shown that networks linking Twin-City firms and charitable organizations were enabled by a resonant civic engagement frame. Given the potential for B&S scholars to diagnose problematic practices and promote well-conceived alternatives, they may find a productive role in this sort of network cultivation. Further, scholars have the freedom to look intensively and identify groups whose interests coincide with a frame. By highlighting aspects of the frame that resonate with diverse groups, B&S scholars may be able to bridge structural holes within a field (Burt, 1992) and draw powerful extra-field actors into a network (see Mische and Pattison, 2000 for a discussion of project emergence). Such efforts can facilitate the emergence of collective norms about the desirability and legitimacy of a practice and the influence of these norms can be enhanced if firms (as the targets of change) are brought into a network (e.g., Galaskiewicz, 1997;

Marquis et al., 2007). Network cultivation may also enable coordination and discussions about effective tactics and strategies among social movement groups (Nagar, 2002; Pratt, 2002).

In addition to promoting linkages among movement groups, B&S scholars can actively promote (evangelize) strategies about how to maximize their effectiveness. Social movements are key drivers of practice change within fields. Studies have shown their influence in the emergence of organizational forms such as Health Maintenance Organizations (Scott et al., 2000) and wind-power firms (Sine and Lee, 2009). They have also helped to displace harmful practices, like outsourcing to sweatshops among textiles firms (Wood, 2000). Still, while scholars have explored the roots of movements and the tactics employed by these groups, the links between tactics and outcomes are under-theorized. Some are starting to address this gap – den Hond and de Bakker (2007), in particular, do an excellent job of discussing how social movement strategies might be enhanced – but further study is needed. Questions remain about the dynamics of counter-mobilization and contestation (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008), why some groups succeed and others fail (Davis and Anderson, 2008), and the outcomes that result from partial success and settlements (Rao and Kenney, 2008). As such, research into social movement efficacy has the potential to contribute to academic discourse as well as changes in corporate practice.

Despite the potential for B&S scholars to utilize their skills to diagnose harmful practices, offer solutions, cultivate networks, and promote social movement strategies, any effort in this regard is contingent on connecting with relevant audiences (Vaughan, 2006). While current B&S scholarship limits its efficacy by targeting firms exclusively, shifting to the field level points to a number of additional audiences such as the media, social movements, and community members. Moreover, these groups may be influential within a focal field and receptive to research which highlights harmful corporate practices and promotes alternatives. Also, whereas current strategic B&S research competes with numerous areas of strategy literature for firm attention (and strategic and moral arguments compete within themselves), B&S scholars have an opportunity to be at the fore of research into bad

practices in any number of fields and on the leading edge in the study of social movement tactics. Given the salient nature of these topics and lack of competing perspectives, B&S scholars may be able to garner considerable attention from non-corporate audiences (Ocasio, 1997).

Still, translation is required for ideas to flow amongst disparate groups (Boxenbaum and Battilana, 2005). In addition to publishing in academic journals, B&S scholars should pursue alternate avenues for research dissemination, endeavor to know the interests and identities of target audiences, and use this to translate their research into forms that are intelligible to these groups (see Vaughan, 2006 for a discussion on the use of negotiation and analogy to translate scholarly research for consumption by non-academics). In many ways this endeavor harkens the role of 'public academic.' There is a long history of scholars giving public lectures, consulting with community groups, and offering media commentary in the pursuit of social change (Foucault, 1982, Said, 1994). To be clear, I am not arguing that B&S scholars should subjugate their interests to the will of social movement groups or community activists. Yet, where there are areas of natural intersection, seeking audience with these groups through channels other than scholarly publication may help to alleviate issues of intelligibility (e.g., Hambrick, 1994) and provide an avenue for B&S research to inform practice.

Assessing outcomes and the importance of context

A key line of distinction between arguments based on economic assumptions and those based on CR and IT is that the latter emphasizes the importance of context (Bhaskar, 1978; Davis and Marquis, 2005). From this perspective, social phenomenon are best studied in bounded arenas, or fields, where particular structures/logics and institutions exert influence. This has two important implications for normative B&S scholarship. First, it facilitates the use of IT mechanisms to encourage changes in corporate practice. Effective frames require nuanced understanding of bad practices and well-conceived correctives, translation is predicated on the existence of different audiences, and network cultivation relies on knowledge about field participants. In each

instance, fields serve the valuable purpose of focusing attention on specific organizations and practices as targets of change. For example, it is infinitely more tractable to address gender discrimination in the field of academic science (e.g., Etzkowitz et al., 2000) than to address this problem across *all* firms, or to simultaneously attack discrimination, harmful commercial norms (Krimsky, 2002), and military links (Rosenberg and Nelson, 1994) in science. Second, well-defined contexts provide B&S scholars with tangible sites to assess the efficacy of efforts to affect corporate practices as well as the outcomes that these produce.

Research suggests that the mechanisms put forward in IT can be usefully deployed in pursuit of social change; yet desired outcomes are not assured. A key tenet of CR is that the relationship between causes and effects is contingent and unpredictable (Sayer, 1992). Recent work in IT also recognizes the discrepancies between institutions and action (Clemens and Cook, 1999; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Efforts to displace institutionalized practices can be greeted with active resistance (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2006) and even where efforts are successful, the result can be incomplete implementation or loose-coupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Westphal and Zajac, 1998). There is also no guarantee that proffered correctives will bring the desired effects when they are implemented in practice. As such, it is not sufficient for B&S scholars to provide inputs into change processes there is as the more important work of assessing outcomes. Looking at specific practices in specific fields provides invaluable boundaries for this type of evaluation.

In particular, a field focus makes the practices of focal firms commensurate by limiting analysis to like organizations (Espeland and Stevens, 1998). Thus, although firms may be skilled at hiding their behavior (Laufer, 2003) and there is no way to account for all contingencies, it should be possible to develop indicators to assess practices such as equitable hiring, waste management, charitable donations, and others among field members. Also, as I argued with respect to extant approaches, it is not sufficient to equate proffered practices with beneficial outcomes; they should be subject to detailed study to ascertain their impacts. For example, Etzkowitz et al. (2000) exposed the harmful effects of previous attempts to establish gender parity in

science by showing how quota hiring led to tokenism and the exclusion of women from male-dominated networks. Thus, efforts to contribute to the institution of beneficial practices among firms require ongoing assessment and reflection in order to adjust tactics, evaluate efficacy, and ascertain whether new practices actually bring about social good. All these endeavors are greatly aided by a focus on well-defined social contexts.

Conclusion

Over the last 50 years, B&S scholars have produced prodigious volumes of work aimed at reducing the harmful effects of business and increasing the beneficial ones. However, this work has been limited by its adoption of economic assumptions. Regardless of whether economics is enlisted as a friend (strategic approaches) or foe (moral approaches), B&S scholars have retained its rational actor behavioral model and firm-level focus. This has led to a weakly grounded view about the sources of good and bad corporate acts and blanket correctives that are targeted to managers across all types of firms. As a result, current approaches encompass prescriptions that are largely devoid of practical context and have limited potential to bring about social benefit. To more effectively pursue their normative aims, I argue that B&S scholars should embrace cultural perspectives such as CR and IT. By locating action in social contexts, these approaches signal the need to surface the nuanced roots of corporate practices. From a base of deep understanding there are opportunities for B&S scholars to develop insightful correctives that inform efforts to frame social problems, promote solutions, and cultivate networks for their address. By pursuing normative aims in this way, B&S scholars might find renewed vigor to claim 'Yes! Our work matters to society – and this is how we can make a difference!'

Notes

[1] Although Barker does not frame his argument using postmodern theory, I view his focus on the paradoxes associated with self-managed teams and the micro-structures of power which sustain them as very postmodern in character.

[2] It should also be noted that some B&S scholars are beginning to recognize the influence of contextual factors in social responsibility, noting that corporate behavior varies by country (e.g., Kimber and Lipton, 2005), but this has yet to make its way into normatively oriented arguments.

[3] Although the early development of IT was catalyzed in many ways by its inclusion of structuration theory (Ranson et al., 1980) – a perspective which critical realists argue conflates structure and action (see Archer, 2000) – it has evolved a more stratified view that separates structure and action in a manner akin to CR.

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