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DOI:

[10.1111/1467-8551.12798](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12798)

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Spence, LJ & Taylor, S 2024, 'Feminist Corporate Social Responsibility: Reframing CSR as a Critical Force for Good', *British Journal of Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12798>

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Feminist Corporate Social Responsibility: Reframing CSR as a Critical Force for Good

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While corporate social responsibility (CSR) research is now impressively broad, we identify fresh opportunities at the intersection of feminist and critical analysis to reframe this field as a force for good. We focus on the epistemological grounding of CSR in its potential to understand and change how managerial activity is interpreted and influenced for progressive ends. We approach this through a reading of the debate on CSR's limited practical use, to imagine a better methodological and purposeful future for CSR. This involves a different, feminist, political and ethical stance for researchers in relation to CSR as an object, to bring CSR theory and practice into alignment in order to revive its sense of purpose as a driving organizational force for good. Our change-orientated approach is based on a reading of Judith Butler's notion of critique as praxis of values; it is politically aware, reflexive, and focused on the goal of good organization to address grand, often existential, challenges. We conclude by showing how this approach to CSR brings a more transparent way of analysing practice, requiring reflexive action on the part of those working with CSR initiatives both as practitioners and as researchers to co-produce better futures.

Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) research speaks directly to the damage that deliberate environmental degradation, inequality, and low-quality work does to and through organizations and management. Research under this wide umbrella provides a detailed picture composed from philosophical, social scientific, and empirical insights, often alongside guidance for the implementation of managed ways to a better future (Wilson, 2018). Unfortunately, CSR research also has a reputation for moral or ethical abstraction, as well as for irrelevance to practice (Feix and Philippe, 2020). Management research and organizational practice are represented, in both our journals and news media, as existing in parallel, with the result that knowledge is too easily dismissed as lacking practicality, while CSR practitioners are equally easily positioned as resistant to scholarly understanding of ways to improve the accomplishment of purpose beyond instrumental outcomes, especially profit.

We approach this issue, which we believe seriously hinders the development of CSR research, by proposing

a renewed critical perspective founded on specific contributions to feminist thinking. We are guided by the question of *how CSR can be reformulated to address socially responsible practice to enable more effective management and good organization with progressive purpose* (cf. du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2016; Edwards, 2017). This involves approaching management as a purposeful and methodical 'practical science of organizing' (du Gay and Vikkelsø, 2016, p. 175) guided by a practical and practised *ethos* (learned virtues and habits), underpinned by responsibility beyond the functional or instrumental. Our suggestion of a specific variety of feminist-informed CSR research is a change-orientated approach to research and practice, reflexive and critical, designed also to reduce inequalities, included but not limited to gender inequalities, and focused on management's potential to that end.

Our foundation is a reading of Judith Butler's (2002, 2010) outline of critique as praxis of values. Kaufmann (2022) and Haynes (2017) both observe that feminist perspectives have profound implications for how we understand material, methodological and analytic practice in CSR; here we present one such perspective in specific

ways. We work the implications of Butler's argument through in three steps. First, we show that CSR research, including critical contributions, often develops from the 'detached standpoint of the Supercritic who has no gender' (Couture, 1995, p. 277), with implications for both theory and empirics. Second, we note the 'tendency for male [masculine] moral reasoning to take for granted the absence of connections among individuals and, consequently, to define the overriding moral dilemma as the resolution of the competing claims of autonomous individuals [or institutions]' (Balbus, 1984, p. 34). Third, we invert the logic of starting from the question of what feminism can do for CSR; instead, we show how the idea of organizational good and CSR now *require* feminist analysis. Our concern is thus not with gender *per se*; indeed, others have already done excellent work on the gendered nature of CSR (Grosser, Moon and Nelson, 2017; Marshall, 2007; McCarthy, 2018; Pearson, 2007; Özkazanç-Pan, 2019). We pursue a distinctive critical, feminist approach to CSR as a force for good through the praxis of values.

We then develop a research agenda suggesting enactment of this kind of feminist CSR in research and practice that illustrates the value and utility of our inverted approach, to show the importance of two interlinked epistemological issues that neither research nor practice have fully addressed. These are first the fundamental importance of *offering critique* (Butler, 2002) that acknowledges the situated nature of thought and action for both CSR practitioners and researchers (Ashcraft, 2018; Haynes, 2023). This then builds, second, on established ways of orienting analysis towards praxis (Foster and Weibe, 2011) that contribute to the development of solidarity in the struggle towards good outcomes (Allen, 1999). We conclude by restating the productive potential of our approach in a detailed research agenda, emphasizing how this can reshape and revive understandings of CSR as a means of constructing purpose for both practitioners and researchers.

Feminists and CSR

Why Feminism? Which Feminism?

Of the many different feminisms, a baseline principle maintains that theory and practice be concerned with addressing the systematic oppression and marginalization of all women (Delmar, 2001). Feminism's presence is once again strengthening in management studies (Bell Meriläinen *et al.*, 2020; Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011; Cunliffe, 2022; Fotaki, 2021), and aligning with accounting research (Broadbent, 1998; Cooper, 1992; Gallhofer, 1998; Haynes, 2017), but business ethics and CSR research lags somewhat. As Cooper (1992) pointed out many years ago, even when acknowledged, feminist analysis is at risk of being positioned only as a reinforce-

ment of the 'other' from the (unaffected) status quo (cf. Dabrowski, 2021). We seek to avoid this cul-de-sac.

A series of arguments have been made for both gendered and feminist understandings of CSR and business ethics (André, 2013; Karam and Jamali, 2017; Kaufmann, 2022; McCarthy, 2017). As Grosser and Moon (2019, p. 321) note, 'a better grounding of CSR in feminist theory can contribute to CSR research more broadly'. This argument is echoed in another body of work from a critical perspective that often claims marginalization (Banerjee, 2014; 2022; Prasad and Holzinger, 2013; Siltaoja, Malin and Pyykkönen, 2015), perhaps partly as a function of the 'critical outsider' stance taken (Banerjee, 2022). This dynamic informs our decision to suggest an inverted approach, arguing that CSR needs feminist analysis rather than vice versa, to bring a fresh critical perspective beneficial to researchers and researched.

The Range of CSR Research

As a field, CSR research draws on a remarkable breadth of philosophical and social-theoretical perspectives and orientates to multiple levels of analysis (Frynas and Yamahaki, 2016). Variants have also been thoroughly reviewed in contrast to each other (Gond and Nyberg, 2017; Karam and Jamali, 2017). Overall, this work shows that ontological and epistemological groundings impact *how* CSR activity is interpreted, and that differences between perspectives remain broadly unresolved (Frynas and Yamahaki, 2016), while often reiterating that CSR theory is of minimal practical use (Feix and Philippe, 2020; Kaplan, 2020).

We have contributed to this (Spence and Taylor, 2022) by outlining and critiquing the contributions of three varieties of thought on CSR: strategic, political, and utopian. Strategic CSR is hindered by the widespread recognition that a gap between the rhetoric and reality of 'profitable CSR', and failure to integrate normative perspectives, simply reproduces the neoliberal order (Crane *et al.*, 2014). Political CSR often ignores the issue that a lack of democratic legitimacy means that the stance taken by corporations as government-like actors is inherently problematic (Rhodes and Fleming, 2020). The third approach, utopian CSR, we read as an implicitly ideological project notable for its inclusion of marginalized voices, sometimes through feminist analysis (Banerjee, 2014; 2022; Spence and Taylor, 2022). Our proposal aligns most closely with the promise of utopian CSR but moves forward considerably in its emphasis on inverting the logic of thought to show how CSR research needs feminist analysis in forms such as Judith Butler's understanding of critique as praxis of values. This way of thinking has significant implications for transparency and reflexivity in the pursuit of good organization, as it begins from the feminist

position rather than applying a gender lens to a pre-existing empirical or theoretical setting. We turn now to a more detailed outline of Butler's arguments and their implications, starting with her approach to critique.

Revisiting Critique

First, we are encouraged to question the basic categories of analysis, or the object of analysis, in Butler's terms. The fundamental categories of corporate, social, and responsible remain under-theorized separately and jointly, and therefore lack both explanatory capacity for researchers and meaning to those we seek to influence, with definitional issues continually being revisited (Dmytriiev, Freeman, and Hörisch, 2021). Second, we see a lack of curiosity in relation to epistemologies of knowledge construction. CSR research, with notable exceptions, tends to assume relatively unproblematic methodological foundations, often individualist or positivist, taking as read the researcher's insight into experience as an unproblematic means of building theory (Kaufmann, 2022). Third, we find remarkably few reflective accounts on relationships between researcher and researched (de Paiva Duarte, 2017; Shadnam, 2023). These are not just practical concerns; they are basic tenets of good social science and reflexive methodological practice (Tanima *et al.*, 2023), and we would suggest that they are absent from most CSR studies.

Critique is of course built into the approach known as critical CSR (cf. Gond and Nyberg, 2017). Critical CSR is usually located within a poststructural framing: 'a certain manner of thinking, of speaking, likewise of acting, and a certain relation to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, as well as a relation to society, to culture, to others, and all this one might name the "critical attitude"' (Foucault, 1996, p. 382). Analysis tends to—broadly speaking—reject the unsatisfactory status quo of living with mainstream rationalist business theory and practice in a capitalist system, proposing an idealized alternative of how the political economy, business and society *should* be organized. Banerjee (2014, p. 85), for instance, in an early intervention, argues that for 'CSR to produce social outcomes that are not necessarily constrained by corporate rationality there needs to be a change in the normative framework of public decision making at the institutional level'. Gond and Nyberg (2017) position critical CSR as a range of approaches, including Marxist analysis of power and class, and post-structuralist, postcolonial approaches to power in the form of discourses, symbols, and the shaping of actors' conduct through discipline (cf. Karam and Jamali's 2017 focus on the critique of neo-liberal economics and the power of multinational corporations). These are valuable accounts of CSR practice, especially its location within social and economic structures and discourses.

Its ethical promise is, however, truncated by its lack of attention to praxis (Foster and Weibe, 2011). For insight into this, we turn to feminist thinking.

Feminist CSR

Closely tied to knowledge of the self and reflexivity (Haynes, 2023), feminism extends 'beyond issues of equity or equality of recognition and reaches into the epistemological and ontological core of knowledge production processes' (Bell *et al.*, 2020, p. 178). As Katherine Allen (2023, p. 899) argues, this means a 'framework capable of engaging with contentious theoretical ideas and the urgency of social change, [in that] feminism offers a simultaneous way to express an epistemology (knowledge), a methodology (the production of knowledge), an ontology (one's subjective way of being in the world), and a praxis (the translation of knowledge into actions that produce beneficial social change)'.

There is no unitary understanding of feminism (Watkins, 2018). Demonstrating the breadth of possibilities within CSR and business ethics, Grosser and Moon (2019) observe seven analytical approaches, building on categories identified by Calás and Smircich (2006) and Gherardi (2010) in organization studies. These are summarized in Table 1, where we also offer an illustrative example of each type of feminism in relation to CSR research, drawn from a range of perspectives that we find instructive, to illustrate the multidisciplinary range of feminist approaches. In terms of the weight of research, psychoanalytic approaches based on the ethics of care (e.g. Freeman and Liedtka, 1991) have tended to dominate until recently (Grosser, Moon and Nelson, 2017), but the scope is remarkably wide beyond that.

In the same way that 'ethics' might be treated as a political project without specifying which moral theory is prioritized, being (pro)feminist as a political stance has intrinsic use and value. However, the question of which feminism researchers adopt and encourage people working in organizations to take account of is important. Feminism as a political project is insufficiently discussed in management studies, leading to a lack of clarity about the social change intended (Burrell and Flood, 2019), or where proposals for change might be relevant or not (Watkins, 2018). The approach we are developing here suggests the potential of feminisms plural in an ontological sense, demonstrated through a close reading of one exemplary way of thinking. While ours is not the only feminist CSR available, we believe it offers clear guidance in addressing widely recognized deficiencies in CSR research; in particular, it enables consideration of reflexivity, the disadvantaged, and marginalized voices (e.g. Haynes, 2023; Høvring, Andersen, and Nielsen, 2018; Tanima *et al.*, 2023). This means approaching feminism as a theoretical stance

Table 1. *Feminist CSR Research*

Variety of feminism	Methodology	CSR as....	Illustrative examples
Liberal	Positivist social science, mostly quantitative	Visibility/representation: women and men in management and on corporate boards	Is board gender diversity linked to financial performance? The mediating mechanism of CSR (Galbreath, 2018). Board gender diversity and corporate social responsibility: Is there a case for critical mass? (Yarram and Adapa, 2021)
Radical	Female-centred knowledge generated as far as possible outside patriarchal structures	Inclusive of women's knowledge and participation	Engaging fringe stakeholders in business and society research: Applying visual participatory research methods (McCarthy and Muthuri, 2018). Sexual harassment, sexual violence and CSR: Radical feminist theory and a human rights perspective (Grosser and Tyler, 2022)
Psychoanalytic	Articulation of feminine and masculine values to create more balanced, androgynous organizational cultures	Valuing women's differences. Business and feminine ethics. Focus on an ethic of care	The ethics of care as a determinant for stakeholder inclusion and CSR perception in business education (André, 2013). What if Lehman Brothers had been Lehman Sisters? (Kanter, 2010). Giving from the heart: Exploring how ethics of care emerges in corporate social responsibility. (Formentin and Bortree, 2019)
Marxist/socialist	Articulation of the unpaid care work and oppression of women through patriarchy and capitalism	Accounting for the structural oppression of women and burdens of unpaid labour and social reproduction	Beyond women workers: Gendering CSR (Pearson, 2007). 'There is no time for rest': Gendered CSR, sustainable development and the unpaid care work governance gap (McCarthy, 2018). Corporate social responsibility and women's entrepreneurship: towards a more adequate theory of 'work' (Johnstone-Louis, 2017)
Poststructuralist/postmodern	Textual and discourse analysis and deconstruction. Inclusive of researcher reflexivity	Silence, participation, and voice in CSR as political processes of power and knowledge	Discursive tensions in CSR multi-stakeholder dialogue: A Foucauldian perspective (Høvring, Andersen, and Nielsen, 2018). Holding powerholders accountable for their actions (Tanima <i>et al.</i> , 2023). Reflexivity and identify formation in the researcher (Haynes, 2023)
Transnational/(post or neo) colonialism	Textual analysis, focus on globalization, global value chains, critique of development and imperialism	The voice and agency of the subaltern	CSR as gendered neocoloniality in the global South (Özkazanç-Pan, 2019). Silencing women's voices in mining in Tanzania (Lauwo, 2018). Gender and work in global value chains, critical perspectives (Barrientos, 2019)

Sources: Extended from Calás and Smircich (2006); Gherardi (2010); Grosser and Moon (2019).

from and through which to understand what is necessary for CSR to be a more effective force for good for all, which in turn means avoiding the issue of whether there are advantages to one feminism or another, in favour of showing feminisms' generative potential for critical understandings of CSR.

From this we are able to address the nature of critique and propose an enhanced critical perspective on CSR. Our approach addresses Edwards' (2017) argument as to how critical analysis can engage with practice, to maintain the sense of connection throughout our argument as it unfolds towards a new sense of praxis.

Edwards seeks, as we do, to bridge critical and 'un-critical' approaches to organizational analysis. We take particular note of his observation that adherence to a rigidly 'anti-performative' agenda, in the sense originally intended by Fournier and Grey (2000) as a rejection of greater efficiency as an outcome of research, has come to hinder critical interventions in organizational praxis. More flexibility in this respect may, Edwards suggests, benefit others with a stake in achieving organizational good, such as employees and pro-social organizations that deal with conventional for-profit corporates.

Part of the inversion we seek between CSR research and feminism is founded on ‘humility, culpability, curiosity, innovation, and, above all, respect and gratitude to the scholars involved’ (Ashcraft, 2018, p. 9), who have already considered women’s subordination as the primary contemporary manifestation of asymmetric power (Fraser, 1985) and recognized that feminism is *the* key contemporary social movement designed to challenge that asymmetry of power (Allen, 1998) to everyone’s benefit. However, feminist theory does much more than this and has much more to say to CSR research and practice. If we work with a specifically feminist theory of power (Allen, 1999), for example, intersectional approaches or multi-axis analyses are enabled, allowing that power might both constrain and enable, sometimes simultaneously (Kaufmann and Derry, 2023). That is where the originality of our proposal for a different form of feminist-inspired praxis in pursuing organizational good lies—starting with feminism whatever the empirical or conceptual challenge, rather than reading retrospectively through a feminist lens. This approach, we would suggest, includes the foregrounding of gender or women’s experiences in analysis of CSR, while bringing an additional generative potential.

Specifically, feminist CSR as we define it is always orientated towards a clearly identified object, the possibility of organizational good. The notion of an agreed ‘good’ is clearly normative, but Allen (1998) outlines how a feminist theory of power addresses this concern. Our reading of Butler’s argument also provides a transparent approach to analysing objects such as corporate, social, or responsibility with normative intent, based on reflexive action on the part of the analyst in relation to those working with CSR initiatives. This draws on Allen’s (1999) work on solidarity, introducing plurality as a basis for effective political action, such as promoting the possibility of organizational good for multiple groups. Feminist critique of this kind offers greater clarity as to the purpose of CSR analysis in both theoretical aims and practical implications. This is accomplished by being clear about the organizational and political realities of attempting to reorientate corporate practices towards an agreed normative good, and about the challenges faced in the context of the specific dominant form of globalized capitalism we live and work within. This approach, we believe, creates a distinctive space for action.

Feminist Critique: A Values-based Praxis

As we have noted, we choose to work with Judith Butler’s (2002) feminist outline of *critique as practice of values*. Butler pays particular attention to the idea that critique ‘is precisely a practice that not only suspends judgment... but offers a new practice of values based on that

very suspension’ (Butler, 2002, p. 212). This is a way of thinking, writing, and acting through critique that has been absent in previous thinking about CSR, including critical CSR. Its significance lies in the encouragement to identify the true object(s) of critique, and the most appropriate form(s) of intellectual and political labour on which critique can be based. It is feminist in its assumption that theorizing begins with concrete experience, while also requiring acknowledgement of theorist positionality and behaviour in relation to the experiencing actors.

Critique is, of course, something about which most of us have an opinion. In its institutional form in the field of Critical Management Studies, debate is often characterized by abstracted arguments about ‘being critical’, positioning organizational action as the damaging product of human stupidity (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) and analysis as detached from everyday lives (King and Learmonth, 2015). Consideration of what it might mean if we were to think of our research and education as *an attempt to offer* a critique (Butler, 2002) to the people whose actions and beliefs we are judging is less common. This would involve understanding and practising power in the hope of what Karen Ashcraft (2018, p. 621) calls ‘joint cultivation’, with a commitment to ceding ‘the expertise claimed by critical performativity... [with the purpose of rendering us] more effective and impactful for this modesty’ (ibid). This involves attention to conceptual complexity (rather than theoretical parsimony), concrete substantive inquiry (rather than formal abstractions or sweeping judgements based on secondary accounts), and greater recognition of connection between communities (rather than constructing hierarchies of practitioner–researcher or theory–practice). It is through the enactment of these processes that we believe greater movement towards organizational or managerial good becomes possible.

This begins to clarify what research on CSR *might* look like or achieve if we were to occupy a less (masculinist) authoritative position, more informed by feminist perspectives on power and critique such as Butler’s. In our reading, accounts of how critique can be more useful, especially the extensive literature on critical performativity, fail to engage with the theoretical foundations of critique (Cabantous *et al.*, 2016), especially in relation to the practice–theory relationship. We propose attending to this by returning to that dynamic in an innovative way—to consider the *feminist* foundations of critique and critical action in the context of the long history of feminist thinking on praxis (Stanley and Wise, 1990).

Butler’s (2002; 2010) argument for critique as practice of values suggests breaking the habit of detached judgement as the basis of critique, exploring the ontology of how questions are posed and answers provided. This is closely related to forms of feminist practice

and theorizing that have the purpose of producing *uncertainty* (Snitow, 2015). This is a potentially productive place to occupy for both CSR researchers and ‘our’ human subjects, the people struggling to reconcile working life with ethical or responsible living. It involves leaving space for voices to be heard, listening carefully even when the message is uncomfortable, and foregrounding the agency of the researched rather than the researcher (Gammage, Kabeer, and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2016). In addition, our feminist perspective means more effort to locate the theorist *alongside* those working in the organizations we study. All involved in CSR practice or analysis are engaged in what Butler (2002) calls self-making within normative frames, exercising agency through practices that either follow or challenge the principles of everyday ethical activity in working life. Moments of ethical questioning in the light of unfolding experience are, or should be, frequent and awkward for both analysed and analysts. Causal models based on categorizations and claims of radical structural change are, at best, deceptive, and, at worst, positively misleading (Fraser, 1985).

This in turn implies ‘break[ing] the habits of judgment in favour of a riskier practice that seeks to yield artistry [values-based action] from constraint’ (Butler, 2002, p. 226). Recognition of constraints on the formation of self and theoretical frameworks leads to a different formation of both, which happens through a virtuous process of collaborative questioning with uncertain outcomes. This form of ‘ethical labour’, again related to Ashcraft’s (2018) notion of joint cultivation, happens within ‘a wider political context, the politics of norms’ (Butler, 2002, p. 225–6), without determinism—the agent lives and works within modes of subjectivation, always able to disobey, just as CSR researchers do.

Butler’s (2006 [1990]) exploration of the nature of normative critique has underpinnings in her earlier work on gender and the potential of contemporary feminism. Feminism is fundamental to this, in understanding norms as a means of ethical justification. Butler considers norms first as the often-unspoken rules that we live and work within, designed to tell us what is *normal* and therefore socially acceptable, especially in relation to gender. However, the second part of Butler’s definition, the social construction of norms as means of ethical justification, is more important to us here. There is an inherent suggestion in CSR research of what is acceptable and what is not, but less often an examination of why this should be so, or of how those norms have developed.

Butler’s position encourages greater reflexivity in relation to *any* form of normativity, including how theoretical or methodological norms determine what qualifies as within a discipline’s remit. There is great potential in stepping back to ask how categories are constructed and what the effects of those constructions are. If the

categories in use are questioned, we can rethink what is taken for granted through their production and reproduction. This is not simply a philosophical or deconstructive exercise—if we do it effectively, we open up new and interesting spaces to see how corporate, social, and responsibility might each be different, for all involved in their praxis as CSR, and for our understanding of purpose and the notion of good.

As we have hinted, there is an earlier step in this argument that is equally important to our case. Butler’s (2002) framing of critique is based on a reading of an essay by Michel Foucault, ‘What is Critique?’ (1996). In their re-reading, Butler engages closely with the notion of praxis, in order to apprehend the ways in which categories are themselves instituted, how the field of knowledge is ordered, and how what it suppresses returns, in Butler’s terms, as its own constitutive occlusion. For example, judgments operate for Marxist thinkers (e.g. Theodor Adorno and Raymond Williams) as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas Foucauldian critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves. What becomes especially important for Foucault, and in turn Butler, is to think through the problem of ethics *beyond* judgment (Butler, 2002). This points us to the idea of this form of critical thinking (as distinctive from critical theory) as a methodology for praxis, acknowledging the feminist roots of Butler’s argument, and allows us to make a case for praxis in that theoretical tradition, to form a distinctively different way of approaching CSR research from this perspective. This is what we turn to now, to finish with some very practical, praxis-oriented conclusions.

Critique as Praxis, the Praxis of Critique, and a Research Agenda

We have sought to reformulate CSR research in a way that addresses the theory and practice of enabling more effective accounts of the possibility of organizational good that leverages the best of research and practice through one form of feminist thinking. Our approach encourages researchers to approach critique as praxis, and both researchers and practitioners to ask what all forms of CSR research, education, and practice *do*. Praxis here is based on a tripartite commitment to knowledge being purposeful (Foster and Wiebe, 2011), a pluralist understanding of theory and practice (Edwards, 2017), and normative reflexivity related to how we research as well as to the conclusions we draw from our data and analysis (Stanley, 1990). Experience, engagement, and theoretical development among researchers, between researchers and research participants, or in interactions between educators and learners, are all essential components of praxis. Analytic

categories are important and useful, but when they petrify into generalized theory uncritically reproduced, the relation to everyday realities is loosened and inevitably lacks relevance to social actors in the changing world the research purports to inform (Watkins, 2018).

Additionally, as Stanley and Wise (1990, p. 23) remind us, all research is ‘inevitably grounded in the material experiences of researchers/theorists’. Social research is by definition inter-subjective, in the sense that researchers and participants are all embedded in organizational settings and are therefore experiencing the corporate, the social, and the responsible all the time. Fixed explanatory categories such as these, and CSR itself, are not ideals against which to test actions or experiences. Our review here suggests that analysts often strive to achieve ‘theory with a capital T ... produced by theorists who are supposed experts on the relationship between categories and thus on the “real meaning” of social experience and behaviour’ (Stanley and Wise, 1990, p. 24). This is, we would suggest, a sure-fire way to achieve the separation of research(er) and realities, and thereby to hinder the development of the good in the everyday practices that make up management and organization. This is not simply an argument for interpretive or grounded theorizing—we believe that it is perfectly possible to conduct feminist praxis-orientated CSR research from almost any epistemological standpoint. However, it does raise a key question, as to what CSR research does, as an ethical intervention into practice and experience. We begin to develop a response to this question in the next and final section.

Research Agendas: Who’s Afraid of Feminist CSR?

We return here to our original concern of how to formulate a way in which CSR research can address socially responsible practice to enable more effective management and good organization with progressive purpose. This section suggests concrete ways of achieving generative theory and action to this end. In doing so, the purpose of this kind of feminist CSR is to dismantle the power differentials and politicization of organizational research and practice and to emancipate the disadvantaged by diffusing inequalities, including those along gender lines. We thus look to research agendas for CSR empirics, concepts, and practice informed by feminist CSR. At the end of this section, we address our own reflexivity in this work.

Our first agenda relates to *the nature of empirical research*. Here we would wish to legitimate methodologies that incorporate reimagining the status quo with uncertainty (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015) as a valid outcome of knowledge production. The approach we describe here is consistent with proposals for a more inclusive approach to methodology (Bell, Kothiyal and Willmott, 2017); it is demonstrated in an analysis of discursive

tensions in CSR multi-stakeholder dialogue provided by Høvring, Andersen and Nielsen (2018). A single in-depth case study approach provides a more nuanced picture of both practice and theory than more conventional idealized strategic CSR suppositions of transparent and agenda-free stakeholder dialogue, revealing the ‘tensions between ideal and practice, supporting the progressive importance of the dialogue process in itself as an essential part of the end goal’ (Høvring, Andersen and Nielsen, 2018, p. 627). Empirical studies of this kind are exceptionally rare in CSR, yet essential in their promotion of dialogue as an end in itself (Haynes, 2023; Tanima *et al.*, 2023).

Others make use of a gendered lens to build theory that acknowledges the contested presence of the researcher as ‘other’ in the practitioner’s world. Again, this is unusual but not unheard of in the CSR field. Judi Marshall (2007), for instance, employs reflexive inquiry to analyse observational and secondary data. In doing so she explores leadership and its gender patterning in CSR work, demonstrating critique as praxis in relation to self and other. Marshall’s work notes different approaches to CSR and the importance of the voices in which they are written. McCarthy and Muthuri (2018) use a visual participatory methodology to understand fringe stakeholders and meaningful participation in the Ghanaian cocoa industry, which engages reflexively with issues of power and voice in relation to both practice and knowledge production.

These dynamic norms, including those that researchers bring to fieldwork or analysis, can be questioned as means of justifying how ethical categories are applied. This dynamic is also revealed in the stream of work on CSR in smaller organizations, which responds to our concerns regarding the object of analysis (e.g. Karam and Jamali, 2017). Research on small-business social responsibility has embraced a critically reflexive approach through the maintenance of formal and informal approaches to feminist critique and CSR. Spence, Schmidpeter and Habisch (2003), for example, note the role that life partners/spouses of small- and medium-sized business owner-managers play in the social life of the business, in a way that is empirically and conceptually engaged with the interplay of public and private lives, a perennial feminist concern that is rarely fully recognized in organization studies (Benschop and Verloo, 2016). This work also demonstrates how critical reflection on issues emergent during the data collection process (such as the act of helping a neighbouring firm), which are not initially spoken of by the respondent but become evident through a reflexive theorizing process, can subsequently frame the conceptualization of social responsibility as praxis.

The second part of our agenda looks to feminist CSR as a *conceptual project*. This means a focus on what good management and organization means to those involved

in the processes and practices every day, rather than imposing an abstract ideal of the good organization derived from social theory or political philosophy. A valuable example here comes from a somewhat disenfranchised sister-field to CSR, social entrepreneurship and hybrid organizations. Steyaert and Dey (2010) argue eloquently for an approach to studying social enterprise that keeps it questioning and problematized, prefiguring our discussion of uncertainty. They take a theoretical view of research as ‘enactment’, and explore it as a constitutive act, suggesting a range of ways of relating with and constructing the subject/object of inquiry. Returning to the context of small-business social responsibility, Spence (2016) has argued for an ethic of care-based interpretation of core CSR theory; similarly, Siltaoja, Malin and Pyykkönen (2015) respond to the responsabilization of employees within disciplinary CSR initiatives with Paulo Freire-inspired critical dialogue as a tool to promote empowerment alongside ethics in CSR.

The third leg of our research agenda for feminist CSR is *practice itself*. Different forms of practice can be introduced into a research-based relationship by careful questioning of how the object of critique is identified, retaining a critical orientation by challenging the thoughtless reproduction of materially damaging socially irresponsible practices. One clear practical contribution to this purpose suggests a distinction between CSR being implemented for instrumental ends and CSR as an activity that would benefit surrounding societies, as detailed by Prasad and Holzinger (2013). The key challenge to instrumental CSR is, according to these authors, the possibility of surrendering corporate power to stakeholders and those affected by corporate activity. This is elegantly theorized, and there is much to commend the practical conclusion of the argument.

These agendas overlap in ways that we can best illustrate with a prominent practical example. CSR is currently strongly influenced by the structure of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This set of 17 distinct but interlinked objectives has now been articulated for almost a decade, but their concretization into implementation at the sector or organizational level is still evolving and controversial. They have obvious managerial attraction—they are clear, target-based, neatly branded, and arrive with indicators of (lack of) progress. In this they might have been designed to reduce organizational uncertainty in relation to CSR or how to approach ‘Grand Challenges’; this shows in the rapid development of accounting for SDGs and related consultancy guidance on how to present this variant of CSR in numbers. Our encouragement to look for uncertainty and normative problematization in areas like this involves both questioning the bases of initiatives that present the world as manageable and their organizational translation into spreadsheet-based accounts of progress towards a fixed goal. For this to be effective,

however, in terms of practice, this approach also implies a shared reflexivity between researcher and researched, presenting a considerable challenge on both sides in the pursuit of dismantling power differentials and pursuing emancipation.

In this respect, we would like to conclude this section with a brief account of our own practice. We are both white, relatively privileged scholars working in British business schools on full-time permanent contracts, one woman and one man. We are each personally and professionally committed to feminist research and practice, in and outside the academy. Here we have sought to build our argument on ideas developed by a wide range of scholars, from beyond the usual journals, masculinist voices, and geographies. We acknowledge a tendency to white-Western feminist arguments that we do not overcome here. Our tabulated summary of published research in Table 1 offers more detail on feminisms than is strictly necessary for this article’s aims; this is done purposefully, as part of an acknowledgement of the risk of our stance, and to offer different alignments and interpretations that might inform future research in ways that we cannot predict, or with which to challenge our analysis. Throughout, we seek to make a clear and strong argument for critical, feminist CSR research and practice, while at the same time holding ideas lightly for their utility in generating organizational and managerial good. For an argument that has praxis at its centre, we acknowledge a curiously theoretical paper that does not in and of itself engage with practice and empirical materials, except through the work of others. This paper is specifically designed to build a new approach in principle; in subsequent work we anticipate engaging closely with practice and the work of ‘doing’ this kind of CSR research with businesses and other organizations. We hope that others will also engage with this research agenda.

Conclusion: The Productive Potential of Feminist CSR for Organizational Good

In summary, we propose two key reorientations to understanding CSR practice and research as part of the pursuit of managerial and organizational good. First, to accept that CSR research and knowledge is iterative, continually uncertain, and in an ongoing state of development with or against organizational practice. This challenges the convention of framing knowledge as a series of authoritative normative exhortations to specific actions. Second, to position the primary object of knowledge as an understanding of the how and why of the practice of corporate activity, emancipatory purpose, social action and outcomes, and notions of responsibility, rather than measuring an imaginary

version of CSR against an ideal founded in strategy or an alternative political-economic world.

Research of this kind on CSR does already exist even if not labelled as such, as we have shown in our examples, even if not labelled as such. We make our argument here in the overarching context of corporate masculinity that dominates access to decision-making executive positions (Poorhosseinzadeh and Strachan, 2021) and frames how power is exercised from them, including in relation to CSR. In response to our opening purpose of thinking through how CSR can be a force for good, especially in the context of the shareholder-owned corporations that dominate our lives today, it is clear that they and we are inevitably part of a social fabric, such that all involved (owners, managers, employees, consumers, researchers) have both intellectual and practical obligations to explore the possibility of business, management, and organization. Our suggestion here as to how to approach CSR research and practice in the future, built on feminist writing, provides one such practical theoretical option which we offer for consideration.

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