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# RETHINKING PROFESSIONALIZATION: A GENERATIVE DIALOGUE ON CSR PRACTITIONERS<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

Studies of emerging professions are more and more at the crossroad of different fields of research, and field boundaries thus hamper the development of a full-fledged conversation. In an attempt to bridge these boundaries, this paper offers a “generative dialogue” about the redefinition of the professionalization project through the case of CSR practitioners. We bring together prominent scholars from two distinct academic communities--corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the professions--to shed light on some of the unsolved questions and dilemmas around contemporary professionalization through an example of an emerging profession. Key learnings from this dialogue point us towards the rethinking of processes of professionalization, in particular the role of expertise, the unifying force of common normative goals, and collaborative practices between networks of stakeholders. As such, we expand the research agenda for scholars of the professions and of CSR.

**KEYWORDS:** Emerging professions, Professionalization, Corporate social responsibility, CSR practitioners

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<sup>1</sup> *This paper is based on a panel symposium held at the 78th Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Chicago (US) on Monday 13th August 2018. We thank the audience of the symposium for their valuable questions and comments that helped develop the discussion further.*

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, socioeconomic trends such as globalization (Carter, Spence & Muzio, 2015; Faulconbridge & Muzio, 2012) or digitalization (Brivot, Lam, & Gendron, 2014) have completely reshuffled professions and professionalization (Švarc, 2015), creating myriads of new occupations while challenging the meaning (Fleming, 2015) and operations of traditional professions such as lawyers and physicians (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2016). As a result, there is an urge to revisit our understanding of professions and professionalization (Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016). To do so, scholars of professions have recently suggested the study of new “organizational professionals” (Noordegraaf, 2015; Risi & Wickert, 2017) or management occupations (Heusinkveld, Gabbioneta, Werr, & Sturdy, 2018), and new ways towards professionalization (Heusinkveld et al., 2018, p. 250 and 259).

As a nascent occupation, CSR practitioners have garnered growing interest across research communities in organization studies (Brès & Gond, 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017, 2018; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Strand, 2013; Tams & Marshall, 2011; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018; Wright & Nyberg, 2012). According to the ILO (2012), almost half of the global workforce will be affected by the transition towards sustainability; 72 million full-time jobs will be lost due only to climate change, while CSR-related activities will create 25 million jobs. In its broader sense, CSR is affecting professions, organizations, organizing processes, and the way we research and teach these concepts and entities. Furthermore, as a nascent occupation, CSR seems to contradict many of the characteristics commonly associated with classic professions and professionalization, while at the same time showing elements of traditional dynamics such as a strong link between professionalization and institutional change (Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Wright,

Nyberg, & Grant, 2012), constructing new ways to define and defend their credibility (Risi & Wickert, 2017), and increased tensions between professional ideologies and market imperatives (Carollo & Guerci, 2018; Ghadiri, Gond, & Brès, 2015; Hahn, Figge, Pinkse, & Preuss, 2018; Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018).

In this dialogical paper, adapted from the 2018 Academy of Management Annual Meeting Symposium “New ways towards professionalization: The case of CSR practitioners”, we focus attention on changes in the ‘professionalization project’ through the case of CSR practitioners. We do so through an academic dialogue between five internationally renowned scholars working at the boundaries between the fields of CSR and that of professions. This original format allows presenting, discussing and articulating the latest research insights on CSR practitioners in response to the pressing need to revisit the process of professionalization. In the tradition of “generative dialogue” (Gerard & Ellinor, 2001; Palmer, Benveniste, & Dunford, 2007; Petta, Smith, Chaseling, & Markopoulos, 2018), we articulate already existing – but still fragmentary – knowledge about CSR practitioners and draw avenues for rethinking professionalization.

## **NEW WAYS TOWARDS PROFESSIONALIZATION, RENEWED RESEARCH CHALLENGES AND THE CASE OF CSR PRACTITIONERS**

### **Professions: a field undergoing massive transformations**

In recent decades, the main focus of the professions literature has moved from investigating the characteristics of professionals to studying the dynamics in and around existing professions (Ackroyd, 2016; Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016), notably through the ‘professionalization project’ and its links to institutional change and institutionalization (Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). Yet, in the past thirty years, the landscape of professions has changed drastically. First, speed of occupational change has

accelerated. New occupational fields are emerging, and old ones are being integrated or redefined (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2016). Second, models developed in the sociology of professions were largely based on traditional professions (e.g. medicine and law), which often were examined in isolation (Švarc, 2015). Although Abbott emphasized the interactive nature of professions, his call for multilevel analysis of the system of relations (Abbott, 1988, 1993) remains largely unmet (Anteby et al., 2016). Third, the rise of corporations and retreat of the nation state (Matten & Crane, 2005; Scherer & Palazzo, 2011; Strange, 1996) means that occupations do not operate in isolation as private practices, but professionals are increasingly employed by large bureaucratic organizations (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011; Noordegraaf, 2011), and more often constrained by market's rationality (Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018).

Overall, contemporary professions are very different now than they were thirty years ago. Thus, a more contemporary analysis is needed if we are to understand current professionalization processes. Recent research points towards examining new 'corporate professions', such as CSR (Heusinkveld et al., 2018).

### **CSR practitioners: reflecting and foreshadowing new ways towards professionalism**

In recent years, a growing number of scientific publications have been focusing on the phenomenon of CSR practitioners (Bondy, 2008; Brès & Gond, 2014; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017, 2018; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Strand, 2013; Tams & Marshall, 2011; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018; Wright & Nyberg, 2012), especially as CSR literature faces an emerging 'micro-turn' (Gond, El Akremi, Swaen & Babu, 2017; Jones & Rupp, 2018; Wang et al., 2016). However, knowledge on these practitioners is still scant. The market for CSR has been growing rapidly since the 1990s (Nuttavuthisit & Thøgersen, 2017;

Vogel, 2005), and it is becoming more institutionalized within society (Bondy, Moon, & Matten, 2012; Wang, Tong, Takeuchi, & George, 2016). Within corporations, we have witnessed the rise of CSR practitioners (Tams & Marshall, 2011). Usually labelled CSR or sustainability managers, these individuals are in charge of devising and implementing CSR policies, programs and activities at their organization (Maon, Lindgreen, & Swaen, 2010), and focus on issues such as climate change (Wright & Nyberg, 2017), and the external reporting of CSR information (Vigneau, Humphreys, & Moon, 2015).

These in-house practitioners often rely on the services of external CSR consultants to deliver their organizational mandate (Gond, Cabantous, & Krikorian, 2018a; Risi & Wickert, 2017). Consultants are a key facet of the emerging CSR profession. There are also an increasing number of studies about CSR consultants as key actors in the diffusion of CSR (Furusten, Werr, Ardenfors & Walter, 2013; Windell, 2007), cultivating change in organizational cultures (Mitra & Fyke, 2017), and in the construction of the market for CSR (Brès & Gond, 2014). Their active involvement in assigning meaning to CSR has ideological and political implications at a macro-level (Shamir, 2005). These “change agents” (Wright, Nyberg, & Grant, 2012) or “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1995) or ‘internal activists’ (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015) are inevitably connected to their organizations, be them CSR managers within corporations or consultants in professional service firms.

We have empirical bases to argue that CSR is an emerging occupation, but whether it is a rising profession is still debatable. Based on a functionalist view on professionalism, CSR, along with other new corporate hybrid professions, would not meet the requisite criteria: CSR practitioners struggle to establish their internal legitimacy and delineate the



boundaries of their mandate (Gond, Igalens, Swaen, & El Akremi, 2011; Gond et al., 2018a), they do not have a clear and legitimate jurisdiction, a well-delineated knowledge base, or a common goal of social closure (Risi & Wickert, 2017). Some would argue that it is just another management fashion that will eventually pass (Zorn & Collins, 2007; Jutterström & Norberg, 2013; Guthey & Morsing, 2014), or that we are talking about a new market (Furusten et al., 2013; Vogel, 2005) instead of a profession.

However, recent trends in the professions literature point towards a redefinition of the professional project following changing nature of work and more dynamic conceptualization of professions (Anteby et al., 2016, Suddaby & Muzio, 2015; Švarc, 2015), which makes further investigation of the case of CSR intriguing. With up to half of the global workforce being affected by the transition towards sustainability (*International Labour Office*, 2018), professionalization of CSR may have a massive impact on not only what professions mean, but also on the meaning of organizations and organizing processes. Despite interesting research on the managerialization of CSR (Bondy, 2008; Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001), the ways and consequence of this professionalization on CSR remain largely unexplored.

We argue that this is largely because studies on emerging professions are often at the crossroad of different fields of research, and therefore field boundaries hamper the development of a full-fledged conversation. Therefore, to exploit fully the promising research opportunity offered by CSR as an emerging occupation to understand the redefinition of the professional project, we need to connect the field of CSR with that of organizational professionals (Heusinkveld et al., 2018).

## **Developing theories through “generative dialogue”**

To enable the conversation across boundaries, we set out to initiate a “generative dialogue” between established scholars interested in CSR practitioners across different research communities. First, developed in management for practitioners in organizations (Gerard & Ellnor, 2001; Gergen, Gergen, & Barrett, 2004), “generative dialogue” has been extended as a method to organize the scientific conversation in the field of organization theory (Palmer et al., 2007). In this latter epistemic orientation, generative dialogue can be understood as a process that acknowledges and creates interaction among different research perspectives on a research topic (Palmer et al., 2007). The goal of such generative dialogue is to create a meaningful, coherent and integrated knowledge, while also delineating subfield boundaries and fostering multidisciplinary (Palmer et al., 2007; Petta et al., 2018). By opening a generative dialogue in this paper, we explore questions around new ways towards professionalization through the case of CSR – who are these practitioners? Are they professionals? How do they create professional legitimacy? What does the future hold? Our objective is to bring together two distinct academic communities to shed light on the disagreements and challenges of resolving the complex subject of new professions and professionalization.

The starting point of this paper was a symposium held at the 78<sup>th</sup> Academy of Management Annual Meeting in Chicago (United States) on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> August 2018. To create the conditions of a generative dialogue, the symposium combined academic experts from the field of professions and from the organization theory focused CSR community. In particular, the panel discussion included Jean-Pascal Gond (CSR) who conducted research with a specific focus on CSR consultants, ESG managers and

responsible investors in the UK, France and Canada; Rahul Mitra (CSR), who has research projects on CSR practitioners in the USA and in India with a particular interest in their communication strategies and global impacts; Daniel Muzio (professions) has been researching and publishing for a decade on new professions and the redefinition of the profession project in the UK and globally; Christopher Wickert (CSR) conducted research in Germany and Switzerland with a focus on CSR practitioners and institutionalization of CSR; and Andreas Werr (professions), who studies professional services firms and emerging occupations in Sweden. We developed a set of guiding questions based on the existing literature on emerging professions and professionalization, and these experts were invited to share and exchange their ideas based on their research. Due to the panel's interactive nature, the audience also considerably enriched the exchange and their questions inspired some fruitful answers that helped form this paper. This paper captures the generative dynamics that emerged during this symposium, while making it more structured and more explicitly referenced. We used the recorded audio from the symposium to reorganize the discussion around our initial guiding questions and circulate the manuscript to all the panelists, who as co-authors sharpened and improved the paper.

In the remainder of the paper, we first reconstruct this generative dialogue among the symposium panelists from the symposium. Their dialogue is structured around four questions designed to take stock of our current knowledge of CSR practitioners and emerging professions in general, and the lessons that can be learnt in new professionalization processes. Second, based on this dialogue, we provide a synthesis of the key learnings that can be drawn from our dialogue. Third, we conclude with current

debates and research avenues regarding CSR practitioners and new ways towards professionalization.

## **RETHINKING PROFESSIONALIZATION: A GENERATIVE DIALOGUE ON THE CASE OF CSR PRACTITIONERS**

### ***1. What is a CSR professional (e.g. managers, consultants / career trajectories / fields of work)? What do we know about these individuals?***

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** From different research projects (Brès & Gond, 2014, 2018; Ghadiri et al., 2015; Gond et al., 2018a), we found that CSR practitioners from different fields (responsible investing, CSR consultancy, CSR management) resemble more to each other than to their organizational peers. They are “like-minded” professionals, who share a strong progressive value-set, have acquired a growing knowledge-base, and are affiliated with similar field-level associations (e.g. Global Reporting Initiative). For instance, we found in our research as we were interviewing CSR consultants that they really tried to infuse a kind of soft political reformist ideology into the conversation. When we asked them, “So you’re an activist?”, they said, “No no no, we are not activists, we are professionals also.” When we then responded “So you're like a standard consultant?”, they protested, “No no no, we’re not like a real consultant, because we want to save the planet, we want to make the world better...” They are permanently navigating and oscillating between these two contradicting discourses, which we called “paradoxical identity mitigation” (Ghadiri et al., 2015). They also operate in-between and across a number of established professions and often circulate across professional spheres creating an interesting ‘revolving doors’ dynamics (e.g., CSR managers becoming CSR consultants) (Brès & Gond, 2014, 2018; Ghadiri et al., 2015). In addition, we found this

notion of career sacrifice that in particular CSR consultants made to be part of this profession. We found narratives, such as “I could have made a fortune if I moved to finance, but it was meaningless to me, and I'm in search of something slightly more purposeful.” So, these actors seem to be less keen to trade meaningfulness for money than other professionals, even though they clearly perceive this trade-off and are in permanent search for a compromise between contradictory aspirations.

**Andreas Werr:** A couple of years ago, we looked at what kind of consultants were offering services under the CSR label in Sweden and what kind of services they offered (Furusten et al., 2013). We found that CSR is a label, which consultants to a large extent have appropriated. We found that consultants offering services under the label of CSR consulting, and thus positioning themselves as CSR experts, have very different backgrounds. In the consultancies we studied, we found individuals with a disciplinary background in economics, PR/communications, management, toxicology, political science, biology, and law (Furusten et al., 2013). This multidisciplinary dimension of CSR is the one that might differentiate it from other emerging occupation. Other new professions in a sense are more bound to a certain discipline or a body of knowledge. This makes this occupation unique, but also tricky in professionalization terms. If it is not the body of knowledge, what is it then that keeps the profession together?

In addition, as opposed to Jean-Pascal, in our research we observed a large variety of mind-sets. They ranged from those idealists mentioned, but also comprised consultancies where the ideological aspect is not that strong, for example, the top strategy or accounting firms developing specific CSR service (Furusten et al., 2013). CSR consultants in our study were found to have a variety of motivations. Some were highly intrinsically

motivated to work for a better cause and typically worked for smaller idealistically oriented CSR consultancies. For others, typically consultants in the large, well-established multi-disciplinary consulting firms, it was just another area of application of their generic discipline and consulting skills. They do it professionally, and they do it well, but at the end of the day it is just another assignment (Furusten et al., 2013). Which is not necessarily bad if they execute their job well.

**Christopher Wickert:** In our past (Risi & Wickert, 2017; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015; Schaefer & Wickert, 2016; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018) and ongoing research (Risi & Wickert, 2019), we found that CSR managers share first and foremost a common objective: to institutionalize ethical, environmental or social issues in those organizations in which they work. This is their common denominator, and a uniting feature is the common knowledge base. Whether they are managers or consultants is less important. I think this shared purpose and common objective makes the CSR profession quite unique from a research perspective. This profession is largely driven by an underlying or uniting idealism to change companies for the social good. We have found in conversations with CSR managers, that promoting the cause is more important at times than promoting their own power or status in the organization. We have many statements in interviews when we ask CSR practitioners, where do you wish to be with your organization in 5 or 10 years? They answer: "Well I want to be obsolete. I want that I'm no longer needed, because that means CSR is fully implemented in the company." And that's quite unique, like a lawyer would probably not say something similar. With CSR managers, we find that promoting the cause is more important at times than promoting their own power or status. We see this in their educational and social backgrounds, for instance having been

environmentalists or social activists, where fairly few just slipped into this job by coincidence but rather saw it as their calling and true passion (the frustration that might come along is obviously another question). Beyond the common objective, the boundaries of the CSR profession are still only emerging, because it is a relatively young profession, which has opportunities and challenges (Risi & Wickert, 2017).

**Rahul Mitra:** It is important to track what CSR practitioners really do on the ground. My research highlights that people who work in CSR positions also engage different stakeholders, both within the organization and outside the organization (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018; Mitra & Fyke, 2017). Whether it is with media people, operations personnel, marketing, or activists, there is a whole range of organizational boundaries that CSR practitioners have to engage and negotiate. In agreement with Jean-Pascal, therefore, I regard CSR practitioners first as key boundary-spanners, who must communicate with both internal and external stakeholders, navigating multiple and often competing interests. This boundary-spanning stakeholder interaction is what many CSR practitioners find exciting and meaningful, but also tensional because they must use and adapt to different messaging strategies and vocabularies to be taken seriously—as legitimate—for them to be able to realize their CSR goals (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017). Even within the organizations where they work, there is a blurring of boundaries, with little consensus in terms of who CSR practitioners report to, which division they comprise or must regulate, or even whether their role extends beyond reporting to implementation of key managerial practices.

***2. Can we talk about a new profession? Or is this just a novel market or management fashion?***

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** We need to look at this question in light of the development from what CSR was 50 years ago. In Howard Bowen's foundational book on CSR, *The Social Responsibilities of The Businessman*, Bowen wrote that maybe in the distant future we could think that there will be someone in every corporation in charge of social reporting and doing something relative to social responsibility (Bowen, 2013[1953]). Over the last 20 years, I think there has been a massive increase in the number of professional bodies for CSR related practitioners. So, there is really something that looks to me like a profession. In the UK, for example, there are many organizations dedicated to CSR such as the PRI<sup>2</sup> in the domain of responsible investment, or the Institute of Corporate Responsibility and Sustainability. CSR professional associations are emerging around the world, for instance, in Canada (ECPAR - Quebecois Space for the Codevelopment of responsible procurement) or Collège des directeurs du développement durable or Cercle Éthique des Affaires (two CSR 'think tanks' in France) (see Ben Khaled & Gond, 2019). However, I agree, CSR might not fit with the standard definition of profession, for instance, because of its multidisciplinary nature that does not provide a clear-cut and sound knowledge basis, like in the case of accounting or for medical professionals. I think, it relates more to the broader commodification movement (Acquier & Gond, 2006; Brès & Gond, 2014), in which professionalization is linked to a new market of this fad and fashion (Abrahamson, 1996).

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<sup>2</sup> Principles for Responsible Investment



**Andreas Werr:** CSR is often described as a multidisciplinary field by the consultants we interviewed (Furusten et al., 2013), involving disciplines such as, science and technology, management, communication and political science. This makes it difficult to identify a delimited and well-specified knowledge base for CSR experts. Such a knowledge base is generally viewed as a prerequisite for a profession (Abbott, 1988). In the case of CSR professionals, if there is a common given goal, a lot of different knowledge can be used to reach that goal and the required knowledge is very likely to change as we move forward in time (Osagie, Wesselink, Blok, Lans & Mulder, 2016). Given this multidisciplinary background, and if we still view professions as something held together by a common body of knowledge (Abbott, 1988), I have a hard time seeing CSR as a profession. Because if it is not the body of knowledge, what is it then that keeps the profession together? There may be an interesting point here. There seems to be an ideological aspect uniting CSR practitioners. Might there be room for professions or occupations that are united by an ideology and a focus on achieving a specific set of outcomes? What would that be, and how would that connect the professionals?

Another issue in relation to professionalization in a more traditional sense is the claimed need for CSR workers' flexibility. If an important competence of the CSR worker is spotting and dealing with the next CSR challenge (Osagie et al., 2016), then how would you define jurisdictional boundaries around a profession, which has as its essence to be flexible enough to see and address the next thing in terms of social expectations? I think that is one of the challenges around professionalization.

**Christopher Wickert:** It depends on the perspective of course. If you look at the self-identity and the self-understanding of members of the "CROA," the *Corporate*

*Responsibility Officers Association*<sup>3</sup>, and similar bodies, they would certainly consider themselves as professionals. However, if you talk to a lawyer or physician they would not consider CSR practitioners as real professionals. (Risi & Wickert, 2017), we look at CSR managers as specific type of “organizational professionals” (Noordegraaf, 2015). A growing body of literature (Argento, Culasso, & Truant, 2018; Noordegraaf, 2016; Risi & Wickert, 2017) is trying to establish this new type of profession, which is not linked to a particular issue (e.g., law, medicine) but rather to certain organizational contexts (e.g., the company they work for). Those are professionals but they are not as independent as a lawyer would be, for example. Instead, they are embedded in an organization, working towards a different kind of organizational change from within, as “internal activists” (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), sometime considering themselves as members of an “internal NGO”, as we found in one of our studies (Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). I would thus propose that CSR professionals are best characterized as a sub-type of organizational professional with a craft-like knowledge base (Reed, 1996). Notably, CSR professionals broadly understood do not necessarily have to have formal job titles with an explicit reference to CSR, like “Head of CSR” of a company. Rather, we see increasing responsibilities for social and environmental issues in all sorts of job functions, e.g. a “Sustainability Project Manager” working in the procurement division of a firm. This of course blurs the boundaries of the professions, but it is a reality that researchers need to address to grasp fully the complexity of this emerging profession.

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<sup>3</sup> Recently renamed 3BL - <http://www.3blassociation.com/insights/magazines>

We observed in our research that the knowledge base and the status of the profession co-evolved very strongly with what is understood as CSR. For example, activities of CSR professionals, if they would have existed 20 years ago, would be much more about philanthropy and making donations strategically. It is now critical for the CSR professionals to try to maintain their status to be at the frontier of knowledge of what is considered state-of-the-art CSR. In the 1990s and 2000s it was all about supply chain and then it was about political engagement. Now if you want to maintain a strong position as a CSR manager, you need strong knowledge about the implications of digitalization or the Sustainable Development Goals, which were not really a topic 5 or 10 years ago. If you are a CSR professional, you need to put these issues on your agenda, and you need to show to other actors or your counterparts in the organizations that you are the main carrier of knowledge in that area, so they will need you, because you can tell them what to do. Then in 10 years, we will have other topics. Hot issues evolve dynamically, and so does the status of the professional depending on their ability to be the key drivers and carriers of that knowledge.

**Rahul Mitra:** I regard professions as not static social formations of disciplinary knowledge, but identities and expertise discourses that are reified through ongoing social and organizational practices. For instance, Lammers and Garcia (2009) argue that “Professions are occupations as characterized by formalized beliefs that specify and emerge from established practices transcending particular workplaces” (p. 358). Thus, in my opinion, faced with new stakeholder expectations, organizations have created a new professional class of CSR practitioners. This may well be a managerial “fashion,” but such fashions may have far-reaching and unplanned consequences, such as quality

control (Zorn & Collins, 2007). What gets labeled (and counted) as an emerging profession depends on context for me—not just the industrial context, but also the organizational, geographical or cultural context at stake.

In a recent publication, my coauthor and I looked at how sustainability-minded or environment-focused CSR practitioners positioned themselves, on the basis of their expertise, vis-à-vis different stakeholders (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018). One of the things we found was how commonly used the label of “generalist” was among our participants. Calling themselves generalist helped them straddle those different organizational and disciplinary boundaries; at the same time, it can lead to pushback from some critics saying, “Well if you're everything, then you're really nothing. What really are you?” I think this is a tension that some or most CSR practitioners probably have to negotiate, depending on their context.

**Daniel Muzio:** One key distinction we should make here is how we define profession. Is a profession an analytical category, associated with particular occupational features, such as control of a knowledge base, ethical code, closure regime and so on? In this case, it may be a little more challenging to view CSR as a profession. But a profession could also be understood as a discursive category, a linguistic resource that occupations claim for themselves, or that is bestowed on them by others for different reasons. If we take this second position, which is increasingly well established (Fournier, 1999; Evetts, 2003), then of course there is a much stronger case for CSR to be thought of as a distinctive profession in the same way as management consultants, project management or executive search (Muzio, Hodgson, Faulconbridge, Beaverstock, & Hall, 2011).

Furthermore, whilst professions have usually developed within the confines of specific nations states (Larson, 1977; Krause 1996)--whether ‘from below’ as gentlemen associations pursuing shared interests, such as in Anglo-Saxon contexts, or ‘from above’ as part of state sponsored projects (Jaraush, 1990; Burrage & Torstenadhal, 1990)--CSR presents an interesting case of a born global profession as it developed with the confines of large multinational corporations. As argued elsewhere (Suddaby, Cooper, & Greenwood, 2007) professionalization is increasingly the result of a new compact between multinational corporations, international trading/standards bodies and social movements and as such due to the combination of these transnational and organizational dimensions (Reed, 1996; Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011) these new professions may present radically different characteristics from their historical predecessors

***3. Can we observe a professionalization in the field? How do these individuals create legitimacy for their work and knowledge?***

**Andreas Werr:** From the perspectives of CSR consulting, efforts to formalize a “common body of knowledge” defining the CSR consultant are still rare. Based on the development of professional certifications in the consulting industry more generally (Alexius, 2017), I would expect any initiatives towards professionalization of CSR consulting to be driven by individual consultants or small consulting organizations but these often lack the necessary power to establish binding professional standards. When it comes to the management consulting industry, large and well-established consultancies actually often counteract such initiatives, as they threaten their ability to take advantage of the loosely defined nature of “management consulting” (Alexius, 2017; Furusten & Garsten, 2005). I believe this is applicable to CSR as well. Many consultants have a lot to

gain from not professionalizing. They gladly exploit the rather fuzzy nature of CSR (Jutterström & Norberg, 2013), allowing them to relate a broad range of services to this popular management idea.

**Christopher Wickert:** Professionalization of CSR can also be seen from the others' perception. CSR professionals did a rather good job as now being perceived as strategic change makers. This is very much away from this tree-hugging perception that was prevalent 20 years ago, as some of our earlier research suggests (Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). Indicators of professionalization are the institutionalization of the knowledge base – beyond CSR itself. Several developments would support the general perception of what characterizes professionalization across different professions, namely the development of 1) education programs, 2) certification and 3) professional associations (Risi & Wickert, 2017). At the University of St. Gallen for example where my co-author David works, they have a week-long management course to become a certified CSR manager<sup>4</sup>, and it's a recognized seal that you can stick on your CV as a CSR worker; similar programmes at different schools also exist. Professional associations play a critical role in consolidating and formalizing the profession and its knowledge base (Lounsbury, 2002). The US-based Corporate Responsibility Officers Association (CROA) and the *European Association of Sustainability Professionals* (EASP) are some of the most well-known examples.

**Rahul Mitra:** Broadly speaking, I think of emerging professions as a mixture of both stable and unstable, and formal and informal ways of doing things—what Bechky

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<sup>4</sup> <https://iwe.unisg.ch/de/weiterbildung/csr-kompakt>

(2011) calls “negotiated orders.” Yes, there are policy documents and institutional structures, norms and practices. Professional associations, like the International Society of Sustainability Professionals (ISSP), organize activities such as conferences, webinars and training workshops, and publish state-of-the-field job and salary reports (see <https://www.sustainabilityprofessionals.org/>). However, what becomes important for professionalization of emerging professions are those user-defined everyday interactions and discursive positions. Two of those positions stand out, in my opinion. First, legitimacy in CSR professionalization depends on consistent use of key communicative practices and motifs, like modes of address, use of logos and other symbols, or citation of recognized authorities (Mitra, 2011). Because of their boundary-spanning role, CSR practitioners must be versatile in how they position themselves through such communicative practices and motifs, so that they might enact different forms of legitimacy—for instance, based on lived experience, or knowledge of key organizational numbers, or networking with influential actors—with different stakeholders (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018). Second, I have found that a lot of CSR practitioners are actively policing others in the field, and even their clients if they were consultants. Greenwashing, or the inauthentic certification of organizational operations as being socially responsible, just for the accolades, or without any real commitment to society and the environment, was something that every CSR practitioner is very aware of. Participants in my research felt they could not allow this sort of thing to happen, because it gave the entire profession—and by extension, their own work—a bad reputation (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Mitra & Fyke, 2017). So informal policing of each other's work was important to develop a more professional way of doing CSR work.

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** I think the question of authority relates also to the dynamics of institutionalization and we tend to overlook the fact that a lot of CSR topics are nowadays regarded as mainstream strategic topics by CEOs (Gond et al., 2018a). CSR made its way into board rooms. There are a lot of people speaking in the name of CSR, and some of them being in position of authority (Gond et al., 2018a). If you look at institutional investors, you can observe some of this dynamic (Gond et al., 2018b). Last year, BlackRock, the largest investor in the world exhorted corporations to behave in a socially responsible business or risk losing their support (BlackRock, 2018). We can observe elements of professionalization or institutionalization notably through its appropriation by people in position of authority. In addition, like Rahul, we noticed the importance of certain practices. One powerful process is what we have labelled “strategifying work” that consists of legitimizing and embedding CSR within devices that matter to corporate strategy making (Gond et al., 2018a). Instead of strategizing. Strategifying is about trying to expand the boundaries of strategy or the spaces that are legitimate and that have authority on the organizational strategy, so that you can progress with specific activity as a profession. We found that numerous CSR professionals have been successfully engaged in strategifying work. Linked to self-policing, we found with Luc Brès that hard and soft regulations are central to these dynamics (Brès & Gond, 2014), as well as management tools (Gond & Brès, 2019). They all provide frameworks that enable strategifying work.

**Daniel Muzio:** An interesting question is being raised here: How important is a unified knowledge base? I think this also leads to what the case of CSR says about professionalism in general, and whether we need to rethink some of our ideas here.



The label of organizational professional (Reed, 1996) is quite useful in terms of thinking of these practitioners as solving problems for a particular corporation. It is a good starting point, but we probably need to move beyond that. I think Jean-Pascal's and Christopher's point on ideology is useful. I kept wondering, what is the difference here between this profession and a social movement? Some have already distinguished issue fields (e.g. Hoffman, 1999; Howard-Grenville, Hoffman & Wirtenberg, 2003), which are structured around solving a common problem, as opposed to more functional understandings of fields which are structured around power struggles and competition over status and resources (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). Similarly, Henriksen & Seabrooke, (2016) have proposed the idea of issue professionalism, whereby professionals, share a normative mission and come together to address a common problem such as a societal grand challenge. These professions behave more alike a social movement than the self-interested monopolistic cartels depicted by the sociology of the professions (Johnson, 1972; Larson, 1977; Abbott, 1988). In this context, I wonder whether the example of normative occupations such as CSR should encourage a rethinking of categories such as professionalism or professionals as these have been traditionally understood. I'm thinking about the work of Gil Eyal (2013; also Brady 2018), which suggests we should not focus on experts, but on their expertise, regardless of who controls this, and on the network relationships linking the actors, institutional contexts, practices and technologies through which this expertise is actually put in place.

#### ***4. What is the future of the CSR emerging profession?***

**Christopher Wickert:** Surprisingly, we found that the more important CSR becomes for a specific organization, the less important CSR professionals may become

(Risi & Wickert, 2017). This is because as the practice of CSR institutionalizes and becomes commonly understood, CSR managers who initially pushed the idea and acted as important organizational change agents withdraw from the day-to-day execution of CSR, and it is increasingly addressed by other managers in functional departments. Also, a higher hierarchical position of the CSR manager or department does not necessarily mean that CSR is more institutionalized in the organization. In fact, we found that the position of CSR managers is rather diminished as CSR institutionalizes, because it evolves in a decentralized manner. The knowledge that the CSR manager carries is passed to functional departments, marketing, procurement, and so on. CSR becomes an attribute in the job description of procurement employees for instance. It is no longer the responsibility of the CSR manager. The more knowledge about CSR is passed through the organization, the less important CSR manager's active involvement becomes. However, when new CSR issues emerge, CSR managers have an opportunity to reestablish themselves as critical experts for an upcoming issue. For instance, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as everything related to digital responsibility are hot issues at the moment and are becoming stronger on corporate CSR agendas. Thus, CSR managers of a firm that had already absorbed substantial amounts of CSR-related knowledge might become more important again as carriers of that emerging knowledge. In fact, in our research (Risi & Wickert, 2017), we are not arguing that the profession will disappear, but rather the question is, how likely is it that it will have a high or low status position? Or will it have a central position in the organization, or will it have a peripheral position in the organization? We believe the future of the CSR profession critically depends on the profession's ability to expand their knowledge base: To constantly

integrate new issues on the CSR agenda of which they are the primary carriers of knowledge. If they co-evolve with new knowledge and continuously integrate new hot topics and then pass it on to the organization, they will be central. However, they always need to pass some new kind of knowledge. That is what we meant by their ability to expand their knowledge base.

**Jean-Pascal Gond:** I do not believe the CSR profession will disappear anytime soon because vast set of social and environmental issues still remain. My argument will be as the one sometimes mentioned about health and safety officers or in medical school or other caring jobs. Many professionals are fighting cancer but if we get rid of cancer, it does not mean that we will not need physicists, for instance to analyze tumors. I do not think that because you try to eradicate an issue, it necessarily hampers the professionalization dynamic. Especially in a context where social and environmental issues that are becoming more and more salient. It means, unfortunately, that something that is here to last, which is permanently nurtured by the new “overflows” of the capitalist systems (Callon, 1998). So how I see that is you have these negative externalities. The capitalist system tries to reinternalize them, sometimes with market mechanisms (Callon, 2017). When you do that, you need new professionals in order to do the job. However, they may do more than just building markets or commodifying concepts, as these actors can contribute to re-socializing actors to issues that were ignored before and translate hard and soft regulations in practice (Brès & Gond, 2014).

On the other hand, I think you lose necessarily in an institutional process or in a professionalization process, when you move from the margin to the mainstream. Also, in terms of authenticity. Maybe that relates to identity and professional identity

constitutions, and maybe that is something we should look at a little more closely. The notion of authenticity in the case of CSR (McShane & Cunningham, 2012), I think is an interesting research avenue for the professionalization. There is a trade-off between legitimacy and authenticity. The more successful the profession becomes, the more people may join it but for different reasons. In addition, there is a paradox of intentions. If you professionalize, you lose your capacity for real adaptation because it becomes like business as usual. An article called “An Inconvenient Truth: How Organizations Translate Climate Change into Business as Usual” (Wright & Nyberg, 2017) describes well this paradoxical “threat” to authentic and genuine commitment for sustainability created by the professionalization of sustainability within organizations.

**Rahul Mitra:** Multiple avenues are possible, as evident right now. CSR is becoming both more institutionalized and, arguably, more meaningless, when corporate interests supersede social concerns at (almost) every turn (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Zorn & Collins, 2007). As it becomes part of management structure (e.g., Chief Sustainability Officers), both the limits and potential of CSR as an organizational practice are yet unclear and thus emergent. A fascinating avenue for research regarding future professionalization of CSR concerns emerging economies. In India historically, CSR has been practiced as philanthropy (Mitra, 2012). Five years since the country started mandating large companies to spend 2% of net profits on CSR, there is a strong push towards non-profit management and CSR management (Gautam, 2018; Mitra & Warshay, 2015). Similarly, in China, practitioners and scholars have long averred that meaningful CSR requires top-down emphasis from the central government in Beijing, despite Confucian precepts being generally pro-CSR (e.g., Ip, 2009). In recent years, with

Beijing actively advocating for “harmony” to be a guiding principle in business-society-environment relationships (Long, Buzzanell, Wu, Mitra, Kuang, & Suo, 2015), it will be interesting to see what role CSR professionals play not only at their organizations but also in society-at-large.

Ultimately, does professionalization of CSR mean that it is becoming more managerial? The push towards professionalization involves more emphasis on facts and figures to measure, evaluate and hold CSR accountable, but they can also be construed in a very narrow and overly budgetary way to rationalize CSR—what Stan Deetz (1992) critiqued as “managerialism.” This might lead to—and has arguably already resulted in—devaluing the social and environmental justice reasons for CSR, in favor of a parochial and numbers-centered way of thinking how and why CSR should be implemented, what is the permissible timeline and cost, and what the company can expect to get out of it (Chelli & Gendron, 2013). I think that is a question that ultimately should be asked.

**Andreas Werr:** In the early phases of the establishment of CSR, the term, as a popular management idea, attracted interest and engagement, with claims to the term, from a very broad range of actors. As the field is maturing, we observed that the knowledge base and the status of the profession strongly co-evolved with what was under the umbrella of CSR. However, there is a risk that commercial interests, especially from the large consulting firms, will resist such a convergence. Currently, I am not convinced that CSR is a profession in the first place, at least not in a traditional consensual sense (Abbott, 1988). Neither am I convinced it would be a good thing for CSR to become a profession in that sense. That being said, an interesting question is how CSR affects the established professions and occupations within organizations? Because, I would say this

is how CSR would have the most impact on organizations. Take for instance, accounting or finance, how do they approach CSR, and how does CSR change these professions / occupations? I think it is at least as interesting and important for the literature on professions and occupations as how CSR is developing into a profession (if at all).

**Daniel Muzio:** In a way, the success of this profession in addressing the underlying grand challenges connected to CSR could lead to its own redundancy. So here, there is a paradox as the effectiveness of this profession may eventually undermine the rationale for its very existence. Although it is of course difficult to imagine this scenario in the current context. But this again links to my previous point on the nature of CSR as an example of “issue professionalism.” Again, drawing on Eyal (2013) issue professions like CSR or diversity management may be guided by the principle of generosity rather than the pursuit of occupational closure. These occupations do not want to close off and monopolize opportunities. Well some of them may, but as a rule, they are much more concerned with their normative mission, with solving a societal issue in which they passionately believe. As such, they do not necessarily aim to achieve closure in the same way that lawyers and accountants and so on did. Advancing the CSR agenda may be more important than controlling it. Thus, overall, I think examples of occupations like CSR show how we should pay more attention to cooperation, solidarity, and collegiality between and within professions (Suddaby & Muzio, 2015; Henricksen & Seabrooke, 2016) rather than closure and exclusion.

## **PROFESSIONALIZATION AND CSR: KEY LEARNINGS**

### **Insights for the Professions Literature**

Our dialogue exposed why an emerging profession like CSR can hardly have a well-delineated professional knowledge base: first, because of its multidisciplinary nature (Furusten et al., 2013; Gond & Brès, 2019); second, because CSR practitioners are busier charting new knowledge and passing it onto traditional professions than consolidating a knowledge base (Osagie et al., 2016; Risi & Wickert, 2017). This allows CSR professionals to act as knowledge brokers for traditional professions (Risi & Wickert, 2017), but at the same time this undermines their ability to secure a specific knowledge base. This has repercussions for traditional ways of professionalizing that makes this feature a necessary requirement (through credentialing and licensing) for winning jurisdictional battles and achieving monopoly (Abbott, 1988). The continuously expanding expertise (abstract knowledge, control of technique, and other bases following Abbott's wider definition) within CSR should indeed be seen as a network connecting various stakeholders (e.g. in-house professionals, consultants, NGOs) (Eyal, 2013) instead of an attribution or skill that is required to win jurisdictional battles, or to make sense of the multidisciplinary nature of the field. As a result, we need to revisit definitions from the sociology of the professions that emphasize the importance of well-delineated expertise controlled by experts as a prerequisite for professionalization (Abbott, 1988), and for emerging professions in particular. The case of CSR also implies a new type of relation between knowledge and professionalization. Our dialogue leads to the idea of a fluctuating legitimacy for emerging professions, one that follows the cycle of adoption of profession-related management ideas within organizations. The case of

CSR also reveals how emerging and traditional professions interact, in particular around management ideas' life cycle (Furusten et al., 2013; Risi & Wickert, 2017).

Besides the knowledge base, there are increasingly well-established alternative definitions for professions in the literature. In particular, profession can be defined as a linguistic resource for new occupations, as in the case of project managers for instance (Muzio et al., 2011). From this perspective, professionalization can be understood as a process through which such linguistic resource can be credibly endorsed and reinforced by individuals. Three constitutive elements for this process stand out from our dialogue: common values (Gond et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2012), similar patterns of professional identity construction (Ghadiri et al., 2015; Wright et al., 2012), and daily professional practices (Tams & Marshall, 2011; Mitra & Buzanell, 2017).

Daily professional practices seem critical in new ways towards professionalization (Lammers & Garcia, 2009). Our discussion spotted a number of important practices for professionalization, namely creating networks (Mitra, 2011), self-policing and policing each other (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Brès & Gond, 2014), and strategifying, i.e. making CSR “strategic” for organizations (Gond et al., 2018a). An interesting insight from research on CSR professionals is the critical importance of consistency in practices and discourses in the community of individuals claiming to be CSR professionals (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018). Possibly, there are specific practices and skill sets that fit well with a particular emerging profession (Osagie et al., 2016), and that define this profession in return.

The case of CSR also shows how a common normative goal can serve as a sufficient uniting force for emerging professions (Risi & Wickert, 2019; Windell, 2010). In this



sense, CSR can be described as a collaborative occupation, in which, professionalization relies more on solidarity, collegiality and cooperation (even with other professions) (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008; Brady, 2018). This is in opposition to our view of traditional accounts of professions as “self-interested cartels” in the sociology of professions (Johnson, 1972), where the professionalization dynamic is more about hierarchy and closure over a well-delineated professional jurisdiction (Suddaby & Muzio, 2015). The fact that researchers, who contributed to this dialogue, encountered numerous self-narratives of sacrifices in achieving these professional goals during their interviews with CSR professionals substantiate this point. Overall, our dialogue calls to move beyond the conflictual perspective of cross-occupational relations and investigate generative dynamics (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008; Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, 2016; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009).

Another series of important takeaways from our dialogue regards the importance of market dynamics and stakeholders in the professionalization of emerging professions. First, studies on CSR practitioners point towards a tighter coupling between emerging professions and markets’ evolution (Acquier & Gond, 2006) at least regarding two very distinct understanding of markets. First, the general necessity to handle markets’ harmful externalities or “overflow” (Callon, 1998), such as social and environmental issues in the case of CSR, sustains a constant demand for new occupations; second, the specific market of management ideas constantly produces fads, fashion and new “professionals” that are eagerly consumed by organizations (Abrahamson, 1996), where CSR is being “sold” (Wickert & de Bakker, 2018). However, this is an ambiguous relationship. Yes, externalities, and management fashion may create professional opportunities (Windell,

2007; Gond & Brès, 2019; Callon, 2017), but commodification causes professional tensions (Ghadiri et al, 2015; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017), while fads and fashions threaten the professionalization process (Zorn & Collins, 2007) as in our case CSR might be considered just a new management idea (Jutterströme & Norberg, 2013; Alexius, Furusten, & Werr, 2017). Second, stakeholders appear critical for the credibility and legitimacy of emerging professions. As state involvement remains limited and self-regulation continues to be important (cf. Evetts, 2002), legitimacy is sought from alternative sources. As for other professions (for instance quality management), organizations often open CSR positions in response to stakeholder expectations. Numerous case studies show how CSR professionals established their legitimacy by positioning themselves in relation to stakeholders as negotiators of boundaries or as pacifiers (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018; Mitra & Fyke, 2017). This view on professionalization links back to Abbott's ideas on the importance of networks for professions (Abbott, 1988, 1993), although the case of CSR shows that the system is not necessarily characterized by occupational groups competing for jurisdictional control over certain tasks anymore.

### **Insights for the CSR Literature**

Our dialogue flagged a number of insights and raised questions around CSR practitioners and new ways of professionalizing for the CSR literature. While we observe precursory signs of professionalization (Risi & Wickert, 2017), there is also a possible decoupling between CSR becoming institutionalized (Bondy, Moon, & Matten, 2012; Wang et al., 2016), on the one hand, and CSR professionals gaining influence on the other (Risi & Wickert, 2017). As CSR grows into an important business topic, it steps

outside of the ‘corridors of indifference’ (Westley & Vredenburg, 1991, p. 86). As a result, other occupations and professions may obstruct its professionalization blurring further the boundaries of its jurisdiction. For instance, as Andreas argued, large consulting firms may rather keep the fuzziness of CSR in order to exploit it as another management idea (Jutterström & Norberg, 2013). The dialogue indicates the existence of a common ideological goal and a unifying professional identity—some type of ‘professional ethos’ (Fayard, Stigliani, & Bechky, 2016)—that is upheld by the members of this occupation (Mitra & Fyke, 2017). The panelists reflect on a number of factors that play a key role in this ‘new’ ways of professionalizing: the importance of integrity and consistency in discourse and practices (Mitra, 2011), self-policing (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018), CSR management tools (Gond & Brès, 2019), and hints towards the potential of soft laws (Brès & Gond, 2014).

The discussion also challenges the idea that CSR should actually professionalize. Discussing our different research insights, we found that the professionalization of CSR may come at a price. First, there is a tension between authenticity and legitimacy (McShane & Cunningham, 2012). One interesting hypothesis that emerged from our discussion is that as CSR is becoming more legitimate, it attracts more workers, and it becomes more encompassing. CSR as a field of practice in organizations is booming with the creation of many sub-professions and the constant integration of new “hot” topics, such as big data for instance (Corporate Citizenship, 2018). Up until now, research showed that most CSR professionals used to have a background as activists (Brès & Gond, 2014; Risi & Wickert, 2017; Mitra & Buzzanell, 2018), and would often describe themselves as “internal NGO” (Wickert & de Bakker, 2018) and would manage their

career with an overall goal of social impact (Tams & Marschall, 2011). This could change with the professionalization of CSR. In this regard, the Swedish context might prefigure the future of the CSR profession. Researchers have found that CSR consultants in Sweden were idealists only to a very limited extent (Furusten et al., 2013), and as Andreas underlined, CSR practitioners can be dispassionate and nonetheless be very effective in making CSR. We can safely assume that this transformation from a more social movement-oriented group of practitioners into a more mainstream profession will require significant identity mitigation (Ghadiri et al., 2015).

Second, there is a tension in relation to the managerialization of CSR, a process that translates social issues into managerial rhetoric and practices following a logic of rationality, efficiency and profit maximization (Abrahamson, 1996; Edelman, Fuller, & Mara-Drita, 2001). Managerialism tends to promote a narrower, simplified view of issues devoid of any conflictual dimension and subsumed to corporate interests (Deetz, 1992). CSR literature already shows how the casualization of CSR trivializes the challenges associated with this area (Wright & Nyberg, 2016). As CSR becomes business as usual, there is an important risk that companies' interest supersedes social concerns (Mitra & Buzzanell, 2017; Zorn & Collins, 2017). However, the rationalization of CSR can also be seen more positively if it means a more fact-based approach to CSR, an ability to monetize CSR, and hence to show its value to decision makers in organization (Chelli & Gendron, 2013). Rationalization can also help capture more objectively the social and environmental impact of CSR initiatives. In addition, the integration of CSR into the managerial rhetoric can be seen as a first step in the process of "strategifying" CSR

(Gond et al., 2018a); and thus making CSR more important in broader organizational decisions.

## **CONCLUSION: UNSOLVED QUESTIONS, TENSIONS AND RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES**

This generative dialogue also exposed a number of unsolved questions, disagreement, dilemma, and uncertainties that altogether constitute a fascinating research agenda for emerging professions as well as for CSR.

Perhaps the trickiest debate is whether CSR is a profession after all? Andreas Werr had a “hard time seeing CSR as a profession.” Rahul Mitra and Cristopher Wickert underlined the importance of time. We are speaking of a young profession (if any) which renders comparison with traditional profession perilous, Jean-Pascal Gond proposes that we are speaking not only about one but many emerging CSR sub-professions, while Daniel Muzio connected this question back to the ongoing debate in the profession literature about definitions of profession (Muzio et al., 2011). To move forwards, perhaps we need to find new indicators of professionalization for emerging occupations such as the creation of education programs that have emerged over the past 20 years in the case of CSR (Gond & Brès, 2019; Risi & Wickert, 2017). Those new indicators seem more related to soft laws, education and community building than to hard law and organizational forms (e.g. licensing and credentialing through professional associations).

Another possible approach is that we are not facing a profession *per se* but a slightly different phenomenon, such as “organizational professionals” (Daudigeos, 2013; Noordegraaf, 2015; Reed, 1996), “internal activists” (Carrington, Zwick, & Neville, 2018; Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), “issue professionalism” (Henriksen & Seabrooke, 2016; Wickert & de Bakker, 2018), or hybrid professions combining different logics

(Blomgren & Waks, 2015; Ghadiri, Gond, & Brès, 2015; Kurunmäki, 2004; Nooredegraaf, 2015). In this case, we need to delve into the similarities, relations and differences between all these ideas of occupation.

Our dialogue also raises a more general question about emerging professions: is the existence of a unified body of knowledge still a requisite to speak of professionalization nowadays? And if not, how professions unite without a knowledge base? We have seen the importance of common goals for emerging professions. However, if CSR professionals are mostly driven by a common goal, as an “issue professionalism” (Henriksen & Seabrooke, 2016) carried by ‘internal activists’ (Wickert & Schaefer, 2015), how then can it be distinguished from a social movement? What are the different steps that turn a social movement into a profession? What does it say about the overall role of professions in society? And about the overall role of social movements for professions?

One of the biggest questions regarding the future of the CSR profession is about whether CSR should evolve decentralized –being adopted by established organizational professions (e.g. accountants) –or remain a specialist function. Our dialogue seems to indicate that specializing in CSR will probably not disappear any time soon. However, if the decentralized hypothesis holds true, this opens intriguing research avenues. What are the consequences of the appropriation of CSR by other professions? Does it dilute the transformative dimension in CSR or on the contrary makes it more impactful? What is left for CSR professionals in this dynamic of decentralization? How do CSR professionals and established professionals influence each other, and what does this say

more generally about dynamics of traditional and emerging profession? How CSR decentralization will affect external perceptions, in particular stakeholders' perceptions?

Our dialogue also left us pondering whether or not CSR should actually become a profession. What about the kind of deep personal commitment and self-sacrifice that have fueled the diffusion of CSR in the first place? Or the contentious spirit which once challenged organizations (Mitra & Fyke, 2017; Tams & Marshall, 2011)? On the other hand, perhaps a more dispassionate (or more “professional?”) practice of CSR has its merit, as shown in the idea of “tempered radicals” (Meyerson & Scully, 1996)? This has consequences also regarding how CSR professional will be perceived by other organizational actors (McShane & Cunningham, 2012). The professionalization of CSR might also reinforce concerns about the managerialization of CSR (Edelman et al., 2001) and about the marketization of social issues (Fleming & Jones, 2013). As first steps towards possible research avenues, we found interesting parallels with caring oriented profession (e.g. development worker or nurse) who had to maintain authenticity while institutionalizing or professionalizing, and with other forms of “issue professionalism” (Henriksen & Seabrooke, 2016).

Finally, our dialogue reveals that the cultural context in which the professionalization of CSR is taking place is largely a blind spot in the current discussions. This knowledge gap was pointed out in the professions literature too (Adams, 2015). Yet, this dialogue shows the potential of CSR studies to bridge this gap. For instance, regarding CSR practitioners' identities and values, research results significantly differ between the Swedish (Furusten et al., 2013; Alexius et al., 2017) and the North American context (Brès & Gond, 2014; Mitra & Fyke, 2017). This cultural

dimension is very likely to become even more important, as CSR is developing at a fast pace outside Occidental contexts. For instance, the Indian context (Mitra, 2012), and to some extent also Chinese (Long et al., 2015), currently provide opportunities to observe the professionalization of CSR in completely different institutional environments. This question of the cultural context is even more complex since CSR is most likely a global born profession, which differs from traditional professions (Muzio & Kirkpatrick, 2011). Being global-born, CSR nonetheless needs to translate locally in cultural contexts. Therefore, the study of CSR professionalization also offers the fascinating opportunity to understand the local versus global dynamics in emerging professions.



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