Contesting social responsibilities of business: Centring context, experience, and relationality

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Abstract

This introduction, and the special issue on 'Contesting social responsibilities of business: Experiences in context' it frames, addresses the neglected question of the experience of contestation in the terrain of the social responsibilities of business. It re-conceptualises the social responsibilities of business by advancing research grounded in a relational perspective, exploring and highlighting different forms of contestation of these social

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responsibilities, and centring the role of context by focusing especially on contestation in overlooked geographical settings and sites of marginalisation. Contextualising contestation in this way centres silenced and/or ignored voices, generates meaningful theory, and offers an innovative critical lens on business–society relations.

Introduction

What happens when social responsibilities are contested in a business context? How are such contestations experienced by actors? What is the influence of different organisational forms, social norms, and cultural contexts on these contestations? In short, how can we get beyond a monolithic assumption that corporate social responsibility (CSR) brings self-evident win-win outcomes for those delivering and experiencing the policies and practices that accompany the assumed responsibility? Here we focus on contexts where there are conflicting experiences of such responsibility, often grounded in very different norms of who is responsible for what, why, and to what end? This article, and the special issue it frames, addresses the neglected question of the experience of contestation in the terrain of the social responsibilities of business. This includes contestation between powerholders and those lacking in power, within or beyond the corporate world. It includes 'hidden' contestation, whether arising from the corporate organisation which has tended to convey a self-evidently benign view of its voluntary interventions in business–society relations, or hidden contestation reflecting more deep-seated exclusion of contrary voices of people/groups marginalised in, or even by, the organisation of social responsibility, whether in corporate or non-corporate contexts.

The broadly monolithic view of social responsibilities already alluded to has taken the form of *corporate* social responsibility. A few strands of research seek to broaden the lens to different organisational perspectives, for example, to incorporate *small business* social responsibilities (Soundararajan et al., 2018), hybrid organisations (Haigh et al., 2015) or NGOs and grassroots organisations (Chowdhury et al., 2018), and how, through standards and cross-sector partnerships, civil society can moderate corporations' 'complete organisation' of CSR (Rasche et al., 2013). Others have investigated different stakeholder social responsibilities such as *consumer* social responsibilities (Quazi et al., 2016), or *employee* social responsibility (Babu et al., 2020). Macro-political perspectives are added by seeking to understand roles of national governments in social responsibilities of business (Kourula et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the centre ground in CSR research has steadfastly remained focused on multinational businesses in the Global North (Wickert, 2021), with certain theories dominating – institutional theory and stakeholder theory for a long time, and political CSR more recently. These (largely) white 'malestream' theories (McCarthy, 2018; Spence and Taylor, 2024) present a narrow view of the social responsibilities of business, with their attendant epistemic and methodological myopia, as well as with their colonial silences and erasures (Banerjee, 2022a; Konadu-Osei et al., 2023). Research into the social responsibilities of business needs to draw across organisational forms and

disciplinary boundaries, as well as to clarify how distinctive social responsibilities look at multiple levels. Researchers also need to make space for contextualised theories of socially responsible business, especially those emerging from the Global South and, ideally, developed by Global South scholars whose work tends to be valued only when they anchor their research endeavours and scholarship in 'sources of authority from a society not one's own' (Collyer, 2018: 58).

So, we locate CSR in a rather broader context of social responsibility which we frame as the division of labour and accountability, between and among people/organisations, rooted in context with associated structural conditions, and aiming at some wider societal good. We emphasise a relational view such that social responsibilities emerge from negotiating, organising, and implementing responsibilities in relation to economic, social, technological, and environmental issues across organisations, workplaces, groups, and individuals. Thus, we see social responsibilities as being in flux, determined by negotiated roles and associated expectations that individuals, groups, and organisations/workplaces construct and adopt in relation to other actors.

The objectives that guide this special issue and that informed the whole editorial process behind it are three-fold. Firstly, we have sought to re-conceptualise the social responsibilities of business organisations by advancing research grounded in a relational perspective. Secondly, we have explored and highlighted experiences of different forms of contestation of these social responsibilities. Thirdly, we celebrate the role of context in the social responsibilities of business (Pisani et al., 2017), focusing especially on contestation in overlooked geographical settings and sites of marginalisation (D'Cruz et al, 2021b). These objectives all contribute to a 're-centring' agenda. Indeed, many of us have been vocal in calling for what might be considered the 'decentring' of the corporation, and indeed business, in discussions of business responsibilities for people and planet (McCarthy and Muthuri, 2018; Spence, 2022). Here, we call for a centring of lived experiences of those who engage in, or are affected by, business social responsibilities and their contestation (Delannon and Raufflet, 2021).

In the next section, we introduce the state of research on the social responsibilities of business by briefly and critically examining the ubiquitous concept of CSR and its limited sense of contestation to underpin the need for a fresh orientation. In the subsequent section, we elaborate on our ambition, focusing on the relational perspective to uncover experiences of contestation, and contexts of experiencing social responsibility, as an underpinning for initiating a re-centring. Finally, the article reflects on some of the difficulties of promoting a special issue which invites points of view from outside the mainstream academic fold in a journal which is a representation of the maintenance of conventional academic practices and standards.

Prevailing consensus and contestations

Social responsibility in business has evolved in terms of labels and integration with the mainstream of academia and among market actors. In popular use and academic discourses, a range of interrelated terms such as corporate sustainability, corporate citizenship, ESG (environmental, social, and governance), and CSR (Matten and Moon, 2020) are used; we aim to highlight some of the collective underlying assumptions as well as differences. However, these differences tend not to reflect contestation grounded in the

experiences of specific people in the contexts of businesses' social responsibility being adopted or neglected.

We identify two relevant *external* bases of disagreement on extant social responsibility research, first concerning its relationship with profits and investor reward (Friedman, 1970; Levitt, 1958), and second from the critical management perspective concerning its authenticity as socially progressive (e.g. Banerjee, 2018). There have been *internal* disagreements reflecting an 'essentially contested concept' (Okoye, 2009), defined by Gallie (1955–1956: 168) as those where 'there is no one clearly definable general use', in particular, of CSR. As a result, there are debates about CSR's meaning among its adherents. For example, debates continue on the object of the responsibility in question (Hussain and Moriarty, 2018), whether it is *to* other actors such as stakeholders (e.g., Dmytriyev et al., 2021), government (e.g., Knudsen and Moon, 2022; Kourula et al., 2019), or society more broadly (e.g., Chia et al., 2020). Conversely, there has been a view that the responsibility is *for* corporate activities and impacts (Carroll, 1979; Sheehy, 2015). Otherwise, there has been an implicit assumption that business social responsibility's impact on other actors is necessarily, or by definition, socially propitious or at least benign. Despite being challenged by some critical scholars (Maher et al., 2022; Sabadoz and Singer, 2017), this impression is underpinned with the emergence of policies and practices, reflecting a social responsibility industry that has become institutionalised (Brès and Gond, 2014; Brès et al., 2019).

This industry consists of professionals (Moser and Lysova, 2023) who operate within corporations, investor organisations, rating agencies, consultancies, (international) governmental organisations, civil society organisations, multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships, and education. Such development lends the impression of a very wide consensus about approaches to social responsibility in business, at least in its application, in which contestation is marginal or muted despite ongoing academic debates. As has been noted by scholars working on power dynamics across disciplines, in some contexts the apparent absence of conflict masks power differentials (Lukes, 1974), some of which are rooted in interlocking systems of oppression such as gender, race, and class (hooks, 1984). We perceive a certain dehumanisation of social responsibility in studies that focus more aggressively on meso- and macro-levels, at the cost of the individual. The more recent wave of micro-CSR research has begun to counter this (Gond and Moser, 2019). Turning the lens to the individualised experiences of social responsibility is an important step forward that we advocate for in this special issue, in the spirit of the intellectual activism prescribed by Girschik et al. (2022) to both recognise and support the role of oppressed individuals and groups who push business towards responsibilisation through contestation. We seek to address and problematise these assumptions by examining contestation over the application and impact of business social responsibility arising from the experience of those, in and out of the corporations, who engage with, or are subject to, social responsibility policies and practices.

Contextualising social responsibility and its contestation

Social responsibilities are highly contextualised. They are shared by a variety of organisations and workplaces within society – and between societies – and governed through

a range of traditional institutions, such as states, markets, corporations, professions, families, religions and communities (e.g. Järvelä, 2023; Motsei and Nkomo, 2016), and 'new' institutions such as multi-stakeholder initiatives and public–private partnerships (de Bakker et al., 2019). As social responsibility interacts with wider systems of governance, the respective institutions and practices may be subject to conflict (Brand et al., 2020), re-shaping, and resistance (Maher et al., 2023), but we lack insight into when, where, how, why, and by whom. Greater attention needs to be given to geographical and geo-political contexts and to the role various local actors play in shaping and contesting such responsibilities (Idemudia, 2011). Doing so raises questions of responsibility and irresponsibility from counter perspectives − e.g. radical, anti/de/post-colonial, feminist, intersectional, traditional, alienated, and subaltern − that emerge from sites of marginalisation (Delannon and Raufflet, 2021; Grosser and Tyler, 2022; Özkazanç-Pan, 2019).

To move towards contextualising business–society relations, research needs to focus on how individuals and groups experience contestations related to the social responsibilities of business in their respective localities. Conceptions of what social responsibilities are, and who the responsibility bearers are or should be, will also vary among contexts. Particular attention should be given to historically marginalised voices and groups as they engage in the contestation of social responsibilities based on broad societal demands (e.g. social justice; gender, caste, ethnic and racial equality; re-centring of hidden history) (Banerjee and Jackson, 2017; McCarthy, 2017; Soundararajan et al., 2023). More needs to be known about their experiences and the dynamics of social responsibilities governance in which their action is situated, illuminating underexplored roles, oppressions, and resistance (Karam and Jamali, 2017; Roberts and Mir Zulfiqar, 2019). This is in contradistinction to many governance institutions, notably multi-stakeholder initiatives, which have ostensibly been designed to address social responsibilities globally but have been dominated by corporate organisations (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019).

Contextualising is not only an empirical exercise but also a theoretical one (Hamann et al., 2020) that increases the potential for radical critique of existing hierarchies and structural inequalities or, put differently, for contestation. Theories are meaningful and can make an impact only if they are relevant and, we argue, contextually so. To this end, indigenous and local theories and ways of knowing need to be privileged as the anchors of Global South research. Theoretical frameworks of the Global North, if relevant, should be adapted to the Global South context and/or integrated with indigenous and local frameworks (D'Cruz et al., 2022b; Konadu-Osei et al., 2023). Some of the articles included in this special issue contribute to such movement towards contextualising theory (see Maher and Lonconpán, 2024; Ramirez et al., 2024).

Humanising experiences of contestation through a relational perspective

In the business–society field, theorising has been slowly moving away from a corporate-centric to a more society-centric focus (Wickert, 2021). This has included a greater role for society-oriented stakeholders in the definition and organisation of CSR (Rasche et al., 2013) and a much more explicit attention to concerns of societies at large and even

the planet (Matten and Moon, 2020). We propose that this brings with it a greater likelihood of contestations over the experience of social responsibility and, therefore, a greater need for relationality. Relationality is a sociological concept that homes in on social relations, that is, the study of interactions, meanings, identities, and emotions between individuals and across relational settings – for example, in workplaces, with the natural world, or within kinship settings (Crossley, 2011). Uncovering these micro-interactions is arguably a necessary step for better understanding macro-phenomena, yet it should not be confused with the pursuit of causal relationships (Emirbayer, 1997). Rather, relationality is rooted in an interpretivist and social constructionist ontology that understands that social relations are generative of reality, rather than a simple reflection of what is. This is reflected in the concept's centrality to indigenous (Tynan, 2021) and feminist knowledge (Butler, 1990; Sayer, 2011). Our call for a relational perspective that is particularly attuned to marginalised experiences does not happen in a vacuum; it is part of a wider movement that interrogates the colonial/othering underpinnings of management theories (see Banerjee, 2022b). Casting light on the experiences of people (and we are minded here to return to the word 'people' rather than actors or stakeholders, to explicitly humanise their experiences), located within corporations or supply chains or rooted in local communities, we centre the voices of often marginalised groups, to contest taken-for-granted assumptions about social responsibility and the centrality of business to societal responsibilities. Centring 'othered' voices does more than add further stakeholder narratives; it can expose the partiality and limits of the taken-for-granted and can increase the potential for more radical perspectives and emancipation from the constraints of the dominant assumptions of social responsibility.

In foregrounding relationality and marginalised voices, the special issue underscores sociality and interdependence as the foundational core of human existence (Butler, 1990, 2015). Yet, mutual respect through social interactions is crucial to the experience of relational (Sayer, 2011) and subjective (Bolton, 2007) dignity, paving the way for human flourishing, empowerment, and well-being (Butler, 1990; D'Cruz et al., 2022a; Noronha et al., 2020). Distinguishing between human lives as 'livable and grievable' and 'unlivable and ungrievable' (Butler, 2016) reflects a distinction between those voices which are privileged, heard, and respected and those voices that are marginalised, ignored, and disregarded (Butler, 2016; Cunliffe, 2022). Our special issue has aimed to bring these latter voices to the fore and depict how relationality is pivotal to the experience of dignity through the enactment of socially responsible behaviour.

Articles in the special issue

The five articles included in this special issue are an invitation, from very different angles, to delve into experiences of contestation of social responsibility as they unfold in a variety of geographical settings (including Colombia, Chile, Kenya, Bangladesh, and Brazil as well as among different countries within the Global North). As this collection shows, such contestation may emerge on sites of multilayered marginalisation that are far away from the corporate headquarters: Indigenous communities (Maher and Lonconpán, 2024; Ramirez et al., 2024); on spaces straddling business and civil society, such as grassroots organisations (Kuk and Giamporcaro, 2024); and a factory owners'

'business association' (Fontana and Dawkins, 2024); as well as within the corporate world itself, among subsidiary employees at different levels of a multi-national enterprise (Gutierrez-Huerter O, 2024).

First and foremost, getting as close as possible to experiences in context reveals that so-called 'fringe stakeholders' are not, in fact, peripheral but central to the processes and practices of business social responsibility. The article by Maher and Lonconpán (2024) epitomises this by revealing the resistance of a Mapuche community to a largescale hydropower development project in Chile that, according to what were ostensibly the highest CSR standards, exemplifies best practices. The Mapuche community's experience becomes an exploration of how their identity − and spirituality − is re-politicised through their contestation of CSR practices and discourse put forward by business. Maher, an academic, writes this collaborative autoethnography alongside Simón Lonconpán, a Mapuche activist, in a concerted effort to speak truth to power. In doing so, the article offers a phenomenal level of insight and contributes richly to our knowledge on how resistance to business activity unfolds from a site of institutional marginalisation and how it produces unexpected emancipatory consequences when primarily directed at the self.

Also delving into a site of marginalisation, Ramirez et al. (2024) share Wayúu women's experiences with state and corporate development in the La Guajira region of Colombia. Drawing on decolonial feminist theories, Ramirez et al. (2024: 1) surface an unsettling reality: that green energy investment, although grounded in social responsibility practices, comes at a cost of 'Indigenous peoples' ontologies, concerns, needs and cosmovisions'. Centring experiences in context, then, allows for different considerations of business social responsibility to surface. In this vein, Ramirez et al. (2024) contribute to a growing tradition of feminist research into business and society, which highlights both the normative and strategic needs of listening to and including intersectional experience (Kaufmann and Derry, 2023), particularly in extractive contexts (e.g. Lauwo, 2018; McCarthy and Muthuri, 2018). Already facing oppression owing to attacks on their indigenous heritage, the Wayúu women also struggle against misogyny both inside and outside their community.

Engaging with longitudinal interviews and observations as well as archival data, Kuk and Giamporcaro (2024) used the novel approach of prefiguration to understand a grassroots organisation's confrontation of social irresponsibility in the Kenyan banking sector serving marginalised communities. Prefiguration facilitates envisioning desirable utopias and bringing about social transformation through the purposive actions of anticipating and enacting (Schiller-Merkens, 2022). Through their exploration of how imaginaries are mobilised to alter the status quo, Kuk and Giamporcaro (2024) put forward a framework capturing the complex, dynamic, and iterative interplay between prefiguration and imaginaries as disenfranchised groups seek to break away from past inequalities through a performative economic imaginary. The article provides a vivid field-based example of grassroots community organising, demonstrating how contestation unfolds over time and impacts the context within which it is unfolding. In so doing, the article draws attention to social responsibility actors outside the core of the capitalist system (Monticelli, 2018). Interestingly, a strong relational lens is discernible throughout the findings of this longitudinal field-based study. Insights into this aspect straddle multiple levels ranging from

individual-level interactions to community-level and organisation-level interactions as well as multi-actor cross-level interactions. A collective shared imaginary for a desirable future and social change aid the transcendence of interpersonal differences, facilitating the efforts of the grassroots organisation.

Fontana and Dawkins' (2024) analysis of contestation arising in the ready-made apparel value chain in Bangladesh shows the significance of our call for a relational perspective on the social responsibilities of business. First, although the Bangladesh context for this industry has been previously featured in studies of social responsibility, particularly since the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013 (e.g., Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019; Ashwin et al., 2020; Leitheiser, 2021; Reinecke and Donaghey, 2023), the focus has tended to be upon the relationship between Global North corporations and the working conditions of the apparel workers. The Bangladesh apparel industry itself has often been treated as a given and remained unproblematised. By contrast, Fontana and Dawkins' (2024) relational perspective reveals critical relations between factory owners and their 'representative' organisation, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), which is as much a vehicle for government macro-economic policy as it is a trade association. As a result, the factory owners themselves are subject to two different 'CSR regimes', global safety standards and national institutions of government, and the BGMEA in their efforts to reconcile issues of safety and wages particularly. As a result, even factory owners who might want to increase wage levels are constrained from doing so. This latter regime brings to light a distinctive form of contestation reflecting the constrained voice of the individual factory owners, which reinforces the pressure upon them from the Global North MNC buyers.

Finally, there can be contestation within corporations. This is especially likely in cases of multinational corporations that operate in different national business systems yielding different institutions of business–society relations. This is illustrated in Gutierrez-Huerter O's (2024) analysis of interview and documentary evidence to show the heterogeneity of experiences within a global corporation. In this article, the experiences are framed as those of managers. This underlines that our framework is not designed to bypass perspectives within corporations, but rather to embed them in a wider purview of data and research on the people involved with socially responsible business practice and their contexts. Using the organisational context of a UK-based multinational enterprise, Gutierrez-Huerter O gathers perspectives from US, French, Dutch, Danish, and Brazilian subsidiaries on the rollout of a norm for reporting social responsibility. She uses a theory of power to explicate the differing experiences of implementing the reporting process from the perspective of micro-politics, in particular the power of resources, the power of processes, and the power of meaning. The article concludes that institutional plurality in the rollout of social responsibility reporting was characterised by discursive and symbolic political tactics according to context. Each context held differing power capabilities summarised as the socialisation of subsidiary actors to explicit CSR norms, the exercise of employee voice, and the political capital of subsidiary actors.

The key themes that we see emerging from our invitation to authors to consider experiences of contestation of social responsibilities in context are that:

- Contestation of social responsibilities takes place on sites of multiple layers of marginalisation, sometimes far removed from the corporate lens and Global North.
- Inclusion of Global South and other marginalised perspectives is likely to require fresh theoretical thinking and methodological approaches.
- Decentring the corporation enables visibility of the interstices between business and civil society, across globally diverse branches of the same company, and between governments and associations. Then tensions and relationships that make a difference to business action may be occurring outside the firm, and ultimately may not even be known or recognised by corporate leaders who are insensitive to their own limitations.
- Centring our gaze on the experiences of individuals in context requires a fresh ontological perspective rather unfamiliar in business and society-related research, but revealing in the perspectives it generates.
- These new perspectives cast light on the relationality between organisations and individuals, and people and planet. That is, there is an acknowledgment of inter-connectedness, and of how interactions between entities shape meaning, and outcomes.
- There are limits of 'CSR' as the blueprint for the social responsibility of business, as it obscures the richness, variety, and normatively positive and negative contri-butions of business, and the many other actors, including individual persons, who constitute business practice.
- Social responsibility is incremental and iterative, reshaped and reframed by multi-level actors, rather than controllable and linear by any one party. The process is inherently contested and diversely experienced by those involved and affected, and a responsible analysis of social responsibility requires a sensitivity to context and to the experiences of those concerned.

Editorial reflections: Holding up a mirror

Given our substantive ambition to bring perspectives on social responsibility from the out-side, it behoves us to reflect on the academic aspect of this dimension in light of the experi-ence of editing this special issue. We came together anticipating that our Call may challenge some of the assumptions about the social responsibility of business as presented in leading journals by opening up our field and making a little more room for other, hitherto more marginalised, perspectives. To some extent our editorial experience prompts questioning about the normal editorial processes of quality journal publishing. As Laura said when we began organising our related first stream for our Standing Working Group at EGOS in 2019, 'We don't want just the same old faces'. To some extent, we *are* the same old faces, writing this, and we acknowledge our respective sources of privilege. In this regard, our reflections here echo anxieties about the overall state of business and management knowledge (e.g. Davis, 2015; George, 2014; Greenwood, 2016), and particularly with the management of the peer-review process, specifically, but from a different angle, its 'blindness' as discussed in this journal (Willmott, 2022), and its tendency to consolidate the power of gatekeepers to decide what counts as knowledge or merely as opinion (Roberson et al., 2024).

We are a group of six scholars from the field of business and society who came together with the explicit intention to make space for underrepresented voices to be heard and manuscripts to be read (see D'Cruz et al., 2021b). We imagined turning the position of gatekeepers granted by our role as guest editors for a prestigious academic journal into the position of gate-openers, thereby decentring our field. We wanted to achieve this while being aware of, and reflexive about, our differentiated positionality. This reflects both our privilege in enjoying faculty positions in established academic institutions, albeit from different statuses (Manning, 2018), yet also the elements of marginalisation owing to the often-oppressive treatment therein of gender and race, for example. However, this objective of 'advancing' research on certain topics and from certain sources does not always sit squarely with the well-established and eminently laudable norms of evaluation of research in leading academic journals, such as 'distance' of desk editors from the authors (usually defined in terms of indicators of absence of conflict of interest), and mutual anonymity on the part of authors and reviewers. Accordingly, we offer our reflections on our experience of trying to achieve the objective in this context.

Recognising that knowledge is situated and political (Lugones, 2010; Mohanty, 2003; Smith, 2021), we have experienced how political reflexivity can become an epistemological compass to value and support the production of certain knowledge, especially when such knowledge emerges from sites of marginalisation or contributes to making them more visible (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli, 2021). But as guest editors, we shared this task with many anonymous reviewers and *Human Relations* colleagues who had no or limited information about the authors' positionality except for the few authors who, writing from feminist or decolonial epistemological traditions anchored in standpoint theorising, chose to disclose, and critically discuss, their positionality. Our experience was a mixed one. Certainly, the editorial reviewing processes were conducted professionally and with a developmental ethos. And certainly, we are delighted to be able to showcase the work in the articles that follow. However, in some cases, 'authorial voice' (Bedeian, 2004) was somewhat muted in our review processes – a norm in much academic work but perhaps less fitting for our special issue approach. Some submissions were found wanting at the outset often in terms of lack of theoretical or methodological rigor. Yet, we are left with a sense that our understanding of contestation of social responsibility could have been even richer had we, reviewers, and associates, played a yet more systematic developmental approach. Perhaps that is always the case when the process of a competitive special issue requires that more articles are excluded than included, but we felt the loss – and withdrawal – of some of the articles from the process detracted from the achievement of our ambition, and in that respect proved disappointing and even painful.

We are not, of course, the first to note the obstacles to diversity of voices in publishing (Collyer, 2018; Cunliffe, 2022; D'Cruz et al., 2022b). And there remains a debate as to whether enabling such diversity is the responsibility of academic journals whose raison d'etre is generally framed in terms of advancing their respective scientific fields. But what counts as a contribution to such advancement – in other words, what counts as theory – is neither neutral nor objective (hooks, 2014; Mohanty, 2003). We, therefore, share Glissant's (1995) call for a poetics of the diverse, whereby the presence and significance of others' experiences − of domination, oppression, resistance, and emancipation

− are acknowledged through all aspects of knowledge production. This implies nurturing plurality and radical relationality.

Imagining how this is to be achieved in the light of the expectation that journals deploy standards to ensure rigor as well as innovative contribution, remains tricky. It has been suggested that more open peer-review systems could be adopted (Dobusch and Heimstädt, 2019) where reviewers can know the positionality − or at least get an enabling steer from the editor − of the authors whose work they evaluate and journey with, thereby 'humanising' the publication process (Abrams et al., 2023). This also raises problems, first of what elements of positionality to 'define' and deem relevant in a journal's call for papers, as well as how to 'verify' such positionality to avoid the proliferation of dishonest claims. So, our analysis of the contestation of social responsibility has highlighted the underlying contestation of the knowledge base of the academy. We wish our field to be increasingly confronted with and receptive to the epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009) of scholars speaking confidently from sites of marginalisation and introducing contextualised concepts and theories without attempting to engage with the universalist discourse of western knowledge. Even though we have no easy answers and offer no blueprint to follow, we hope at least that our reflections will help this critical issue to remain on the agenda.

We hope that readers will recognise that this collection offers a diverse range of perspectives and that some of our mission, at least, has been achieved. Although we committed fervently to overcoming some of these barriers in this special issue and preserving the authorial voice (Bedeian, 2004), we would have liked to have achieved more and been in a stronger position to offer improved models of editorial stewardship. Drawing on our experience, and recognising the primary role that editors, as well as the anonymous reviewers they select, play in establishing a supportive relationship with authors to make space for othered voices, we advocate for an ethos of writing in friendship (Townley, 1994). This, we think, would go some way to generating more social responsibility within our own profession to counter the powerful mechanisms of domination and exclusion that prevent certain voices and perspectives from getting the space they deserve in the academy.

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