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"While issues concerning the social responsibilities of businesses have long been the subject of debate, today's conception of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) marks a new departure."

David Henderson (2001: 15), British academic economist and former head of the Economics and Statistics Department at OECD, in his critique of CSR as a "misguided virtue"

1 Addressing business' responsibilities toward society

Stakeholders' views on corporations have shifted radically throughout the last twenty years – as has the way corporations look at society (for empirical evidence, see PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2003; KPMG International, 2008; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2010, among others). There is growing recognition that corporate ethics have a considerable impact on the economic performance of business organizations nowadays; addressing values, integrity, transparency, and accountability has thus become a requirement in the modern corporate world (Joyner & Payne, 2002). Despite some skepticism with regard to a redefinition of the business-society interface and the overall beneficial effects of a "socially responsible capitalism" on society (Owen, 2001: 8; see also Beckert, 2006), one has recently been able to witness the emergence of a new way of thinking of, and within, corporate management with regard to the role, purpose, duties, and responsibilities of business organizations.¹

A variety of labels has been used to account for this novel managerial "creed", the notion of corporate social responsibility (CSR) being the broadest and most

1 In short, capitalism in post-war Europe is seen as having passed through several distinct phases (e.g., Useem, 1996; Owen, 2001): "Managerial capitalism" during the 1950s and 1960s was characterized by executives enjoying a fairly high degree of discretion in deciding how to use the resources at their disposal, whereas shareholders remained generally passive (Owen, 2001). In the public sphere, business organizations were perceived mainly in their role as employers. In the 1970s, and even more decisively in the 1980s and early 1990s, conditions changed considerably and the rise of shareholder activism (Useem, 1993; Davis & Thompson, 1994) led to another phase referred to as "investor capitalism" (Fligstein, 1990; Useem, 1996), with corporate executives finding themselves under growing pressure from capital markets. However, a core incentive for maximizing shareholder value – the alignment of managers' and owners' interests by, for instance, introducing stock option plans as part of managers' remuneration – did not necessarily result in an improvement of actual management performance (Koslowski, 2000; Dobbin & Zorn, 2005). In addition, the world of business had to face massive criticism after various cases of corporate malfeasance around the turn of the millennium (e.g., Dobbin & Zorn, 2005, plus commentaries) as well as in reaction to the events that led to the global financial crisis in 2008. For the last decade, observers therefore have seen antecedents of a change toward a distinct third phase which might be labeled a "socially responsible capitalism" (Owen, 2001), implying a redefined role of business within society.

prominent – although comparatively vague and in many respects arbitrary – construct (Clarkson, 1995; Carroll, 1998; Matten & Crane, 2005; Crane & Matten, 2010).² Despite some evidence of “much disorder under the sun” (Sacconi, 2004: 1), the idea of CSR has, as various commentators note, “caught on” (Henderson, 2001: 15) or even “won the battle of ideas” (Crook, 2005: 1; see also Matten & Moon, 2008). It has been endorsed, as Owen (2001) points out, by a substantial number of corporations and business organizations, by interest groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), academia, capital market actors, governments and inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), as well as by a growing army of consultants.

How corporations affect society seems key to both management practice and scholarship. The phenomenon of CSR has, as the authors of a recently published handbook (Crane, McWilliams, Matten, Moon, & Siegel, 2008b: 3) put it, “experienced a journey that is almost unique in the pantheon of ideas in the management literature”. With core questions being as old as business itself, CSR – as a distinct managerial idea – has been subject to scholarly attention at the theoretical or conceptual level for at least a decade now; however, its global “rise to prominence has not been at all a smooth one” (Crane et al., 2008b: 4). The victory march of CSR has also been characterized by ideological debate, discredit, marginalization, and preference given to “new or supposedly better ways of conceptualizing the business and society interface” (Crane et al., 2008b: 4). Content and scope of CSR, especially as a management concept or instrument, are still contested in the corporate world. Academia, on the other hand, does not even share a common definition of their research object. Overall, scholarly work that has emerged around CSR all too often has to face criticism for not being fully convincing in terms of construct clarity and methodical rigor, as well as for neglecting the “institutional history” in which these practices have emerged (Guthrie & Durand, 2008). Remarkably, central issues remain unclear: For instance, and despite its dominance in the field, the question of whether CSR is favorable to business and enhances profitability has not yet been consistently answered by empirical research (for an overview, see Orlitzky, 2008, among others).

The study at hand does not claim to address, or even remedy, such broad issues. What it will offer is a thorough examination of the discourse of/on CSR in one particular cultural setting with the overall aim to enhance our understanding of how CSR is spreading throughout the corporate world, and of the contents and implications that are conveyed by this very idea. I will do so by focusing on a specific voice in this discourse, namely that of the societal actors primarily concerned by the notion of CSR – i.e., the perspective of business organizations.

2 Other labels that are frequently used as synonyms of, or that allude to, the notion of CSR are – to name only the most common – corporate responsibility, corporate citizenship, corporate social responsiveness, corporate social performance, corporate accountability, corporate sustainability, corporate ethics, and good corporate governance.

1.1 *The global rise of CSR as a management concept*

Three distinct observations have informed this research and serve as multiple, yet interdependent, points of departure. First, CSR has developed to become – on a more or less worldwide scale – *the* trend in corporate governance since the early 2000s. Such an observation raises interesting questions as this global movement spans various national business systems, divergent models of governance, and, thus, also governance systems that incorporate divergent institutional logics (see also Meyer & Höllerer, 2009).³ Second, for empirical contexts like continental Europe, this trend implies a recent shift toward *explicitly* addressing issues of CSR – despite a long and taken-for-granted tradition of adhering to an *implicit* CSR agenda (Matten & Moon, 2008). Third, such explicit commitment directly follows a period characterized by the adoption of yet another management concept: shareholder value. Like the majority of contemporary management ideas and trends, shareholder value is of North American origin and therefore also embodies a specific ideology (Djelic, 1998). Especially as a shareholder value orientation is one of the most distinct emblems of the Anglo-American corporate governance model (Meyer & Höllerer, 2010), which considerably differs from the predominant logic of corporate governance and control in continental European countries, the recent development (i.e., public discredit of the idea of shareholder value) has left corporations in need to explain and justify the renewed shift in orientation (i.e., toward CSR). Hence, business organizations and corporate managements are required to give sense to, rationalize – i.e., theorize on –, and provide legitimate accounts for CSR rhetoric and practice. I will address these issues more succinctly on the following pages.

1.1.1 *CSR as a global trend in corporate governance*

Recently, corporations worldwide have often found themselves in the midst of an intense public debate regarding the responsibilities of business. In Austria, like in the whole of Europe, this debate on a distinct “social” or “societal” responsibility of corporations was triggered by an emerging sustainability movement, by critical voices from new sociopolitical actors like green parties and a variety of NGOs that started to advocate environmental and social concerns, by increased consumer activism and, consequently, increased market pressure, and especially in reaction to criticism of the appropriateness and implications of an exclusive shareholder

3 The literature on national business systems, varieties of capitalism, and divergent systems of governance (e.g., Whitley, 1999; Hall & Soskice, 2001) mainly juxtaposes an Anglo-American and a continental European system of governance. However, it should be stressed that the worldwide diffusion of CSR also affects, among others, Asia and several developing countries.

orientation. In order to comprehend the rise of CSR at the turn of the millennium, it is crucial to acknowledge the veritable crisis in corporate control (Dobbin & Zorn, 2005, plus commentaries) that resulted from a series of corporate malfeasance, fraud, and accounting scandals (for instance, Enron, WorldCom, and Parmalat), shocked the global business community, and facilitated the design of alternative models of corporate governance. The predicted end of the shareholder value ideology (Fligstein, 2005) and its specific conception of corporate control (see also Meyer & Höllerer, 2009) gave significant momentum to the discussion of one of the most fundamental issues in normative business management: the matter of role and purpose of a corporation, i.e., the question of whose interests a corporation is supposed to serve (e.g., Freeman, 1984; Donaldson & Preston, 1995; Waddock, 2001).

Corporations are forced to proactively engage in this discourse for two main reasons: First, to reduce risk and to shape the political agenda (i.e., to influence policies actively that might otherwise lead to increased regulation), including national and supranational initiatives on corporate governance and CSR; second, to meet anticipated and actual societal expectations appropriately. Indeed, discursively constructing and managing organizations' legitimacy (see Suchman, 1995; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, among others) as well as maintaining their "license to operate" have become key tasks for corporations that are increasingly under pressure to present themselves as valuable members of society that behave with integrity – even more so in the light of instable financial markets and a loss of confidence in corporate executive boards. In this respect, the relevance of CSR rests in its role as a basic orientation model implying considerable consequences on governance and control mechanisms both within corporations and within society at large. Voices that reject the idea of an extended range of corporate responsibilities – i.e., duties exceeding compliance with mere economic objectives (see chapter on CSR below for more) – at all have been rare recently. As Wilson (2003: 3) puts it, "what is in question is not whether corporate managers have an obligation to consider the needs of society, but the extent to which they should consider these needs".

Potential building blocks of how corporations could actually cope with, and rise to, these new challenges in corporate governance already existed "along the path" (Schneiberg, 2007) before the concept itself took off; most of the components of CSR were not invented or designed anew, but rather created by combining established practices and concepts from various contexts (see also Campbell, 2004). Among the most important ones, there is the tradition of a multiple stakeholder orientation governing conceptions of corporate control in continental Europe, as well as the established instruments and rhetoric of corporate social performance: These stem more from the Anglo-American context and embrace the idea of corporate philanthropy, but obviously strike a chord with the paternalistic self-perception of the continental European business elite (see also Meyer & Höllerer,

2009). Integrating (and driven by) other, more established issues like, for instance, environmental protection and sustainability (e.g., Löfstedt & Vogel, 2001, plus commentaries; see also Matten & Moon, 2008), the notion of CSR soon became a comprehensive label for a “bundle” of related sub-concepts, and a global trend in corporate governance and management. Its advocates have been promoting CSR as a globally theorized solution for a universal problem; nonetheless, they underline the necessity for it to be translated and modified when disseminating into specific local⁴ contexts: As Meyer (2004) points out, even if new management concepts are globally available, and have been theorized to a high degree in their native context (see also Meyer, 2002), they nonetheless need to pass through a powerful filter of local structural and cultural constraints in order to become legitimate in other contexts.

It can be expected that the emergence, the process of translation, and an ongoing institutionalization of CSR are mirrored in public discourse (for instance, in the media coverage of the issue, see also Figure 8 below) as well as in a debate on much broader governance topics. The development described above definitely caused a hype in academic literature (see, for instance, Carroll, 1999; Sahlin-Andersson, 2006; Aguilera, Rupp, Williams, & Ganapathi, 2007; Campbell, 2007; den Hond, de Bakker, & Neergard, 2007b; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Crane, McWilliams, Matten, Moon, & Siegel, 2008c; Matten & Moon, 2008; Crane & Matten, 2010). However, despite its prominence and role as a new orientation model, there are only a few studies empirically analyzing the dissemination and meaning of CSR commitment (e.g., Weaver, Trevino, & Cochran, 1999; Maignan & Ralston, 2002; with regard to annual reporting, e.g., de Bakker, Ohlsson, den Hond, Tengblad, & Turcotte, 2007; Stratling, 2007) or that of CSR-related sustainability practices (e.g., King & Lenox, 2000; Hoffman, 2001; Aerts & Cormier, 2009).

1.1.2 *Continental Europe: From implicit to explicit CSR?*

It is important to hold that CSR does not mean the same thing on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, neither in academia nor in corporate practice. Differences in legislation, sociopolitical and cultural traditions, as well as the broader institutional framework result in remarkably divergent language and vocabulary, action, and overall interpretation of the issue (Maignan & Ralston, 2002). In one of the most prominent recent publications on CSR, Matten and Moon (2008) raise a number of interesting and important questions. In particular, they provide a powerful conceptual approach that takes into account the institutional framework of the specific local context (see also Doh & Guay, 2006; Tempel & Walgenbach, 2007). In continental Europe (and parts of the world other than the United States and Canada), the Anglo-American coined vocabulary of “explicit CSR” – stressing, in

4 Note that “local” here refers to both the field and the organizational level.

particular, a business or strategic case linked to the idea of corporate giving and philanthropy – has been established only recently, whereas it has been widely used in North America for decades (Matten & Moon, 2008). The same applies to a tradition of highlighting and documenting voluntary corporate action beyond requirement (see, for instance, Vogel, 2005 and his remarks on a “market for virtue”).

However, this does not at all mean that the idea of a social responsibility of business had been alien to continental European countries like Austria, or that corporations in a non-Anglo-American context had in the past neglected their social responsibility (Matten & Moon, 2008). Being responsible for the wider community and for society in general (i.e., responsibility exceeding the sphere of immediate conduct of business) has been part of a taken-for-granted understanding and thus points to the “indigenous” nature of the concept in continental Europe (see also European Management Forum, 1973; Steinmann, 1973; Ulrich & Fluri, 1975; European Commission, 2001, among others). What one has actually been witnessing is – at least on a superficial level very much in line with this deeply rooted yet implicit CSR agenda⁵ – a recent shift toward explicitly addressing issues of CSR. After 2000, corporations in continental Europe and their lobbyists⁶ proactively adopted and embraced the concept of CSR within their communication routines; they used their discretion “to engage in firm-specific responsibility practices and to articulate these as CSR, regardless of the fact that responsible business practices have been and continue to be implicitly part of their day-to-day business activities” (Matten & Moon, 2008: 405). Since then, CSR has not only been a guiding idea in an increasingly complex world (i.e., a tool of “enlightened” corporate governance and control), but has also served corporations’ interests as a means of substantiating and managing legitimacy toward the organizational environment, primarily as a reaction to criticism and lobbying activities by interest groups, political parties, or social movements (Holzer, 2008) – and, in particular, by way of preventing increased state regulation. In a similar vein, Matten and Moon (2008) argue that the rise of explicit CSR in Europe is essentially a response to

5 Especially for corporatist countries like Austria the idea of social/societal responsibility of business is by no means anything new. It is firmly anchored and documented in the broader institutional framework and in wider policy arrangements, for instance in laws, legal regulation, established informal forms and practices of organizational governance and political decision making (e.g., in the construct of “social partnership”), or in emphasizing, from a more paternalistic point of view, the business leaders’ and industrialists’ – as part of a nation’s elite – responsibility for the organization, especially the workforce and their families, as well as for the local community at large. Note that especially this paternalistic perspective shows distinct elements of the moral case for CSR (as opposed to a business case framing; see below for details).

6 Compared to the Anglo-American context, explicit CSR in Europe is predominantly driven by large corporations, initiatives of wider industry associations, and also by government programs (Matten & Moon, 2008).

changes in the historically grown institutional frameworks of European national business systems.

Drawing on established Anglo-American tools and terminology, explicit CSR soon became an appropriate managerial practice and started its victory march on a more or less global scale, with institutional mechanisms playing a decisive and dominant role.⁷ Thus, the career and dissemination of CSR in Austria – or more precisely, the concept's "translation into Austrian" – only mirrors a global trend that leaves its localized imprints in a wide range of artifacts.

1.1.3 Assigning meaning to the "new" notion of social responsibility of business

The trend toward managing legitimacy by directly and explicitly addressing the business-society interface represented a remarkable break with continental European corporations' traditional way of fulfilling their economic responsibility (which tacitly and implicitly covered a broad array of CSR-related issues, moderated through the institutional framework in place). Explicit CSR, as a distinct managerial idea and practice, had been presented as the global solution for tackling problematic business-society relations and as a remedy for the new challenges within the corporate world. However, as with many new ideas and concepts, the very meaning and practical consequences of CSR have remained far from obvious: Depending on perspective, different elements and aspects have been emphasized and integrated into, or excluded from, the CSR agenda and concept. A multiplicity of labels and (sometimes contradictory) meanings assigned by different actors in the arena (Hilß, 2006), a lack of a consistent definition, and an insufficient anchoring in management science or any other academic discipline are just some of the features that still characterize the phenomenon.

While the adoption of explicit CSR in the 2000s has made the conceptual tools, vocabulary, and rhetoric accessible, such ambiguity and the previous – in many cases equally explicit – turn toward shareholder value have led corporations to experience strong pressure to justify, vis-à-vis internal and external audiences, why they adopted and aligned this new concept in corporate governance. Furthermore, they must specify, at least to a certain extent, how this new orientation influences corporate belief systems and activities. They do so by providing accounts. Organizational institutionalism holds that in the course of institutionalization, accounts become increasingly ready-made (e.g., Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Meyer, 2004). When ideas and objects imbued with cultural meaning spread from one cultural context to the next, they must often be interpreted anew and adapted in order to provide accounts that are legitimate within the new local requirements (e.g.,

7 For instance, Matten and Moon (2008) identify coercive isomorphism, mimetic processes, and normative pressures that have encouraged explicit CSR throughout Europe (see also DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2008).

Benford & Snow, 2000). Thus, even if they use globally available building blocks, actors nonetheless need to assign meaning and, in this respect, theorize CSR once more:⁸ What is it about, and why and how does it represent a viable and enduring solution for a specific social problem? Despite its ongoing institutionalization (Crane et al., 2008b), the socially shared understanding of what CSR actually means, which constituents are to be regarded as addressees, or how corporations can account for appropriate conduct, is still in some state of flux. The process of assignment – or negotiation – of meaning at field level is thus central to this study.

CSR is an accepted managerial practice in most cultural settings nowadays. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that successful CSR rhetoric and practice is dependent on successful field-level theorization (i.e., theorization that resonates in a specific local setting). Meyer (2004) points out that most contemporary management concepts, although shaped by globally prevalent rationalized myths, institutional logics, and theorizations (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Friedland & Alford, 1991; Strang & Meyer, 1993; Strang & Soule, 1998; Benford & Snow, 2000), and although spread on a worldwide scale, cannot be transferred wholesale from one social context to another. She underlines that whenever such concepts disseminate beyond cultural boundaries to become globally accessible, culturally-resonant modifications of the theorization are a precondition for further diffusion, as the appropriateness of accounts is closely linked to the cultural context in which they are employed. During these translations (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996) or “editing” processes (Sahlin-Andersson, 1996), concepts often considerably change their meaning – a characteristic that applies in particular to a concept that stresses the (essentially cultural) dimensions of responsibility and accountability, as well as implying substantial consequences for governance mechanisms both at the corporate and societal level.

1.2 Focus and research questions: Dissemination and meaning

This study focuses on corporations' efforts to mobilize and manage legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008) in the face of multiple and potentially incommensurable claims by a variety of constituents. In fact, corporations have been doing just this by increasingly adopting and utilizing the management

8 In assigning and constructing meaning, any social actor essentially refers to, is guided by, and – to a certain degree – reproduces existing cultural constructs in the field (for instance, by drawing on interpretive packages available in field-level discourse; see also Meyer & Höllerer, 2010); such reproduction also implies the reconstruction of discursively and socially shared categories and symbols. In order to address the more or less simultaneous processes of reconstruction and construction of meaning, one might prefer to make use of the technical term of “(re-)construction”; to a lesser degree, this also emphasizes that any observer is an active – and never perfectly neutral – part of the construction process of the social world (e.g., Lueger, 2001).

concept of CSR. Building on the understanding that such mobilization of legitimacy is primarily a discursive process (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), I will analyze corporations' efforts to become identified with values, symbols, and ideas that are perceived as legitimate, and thus to demonstrate alignment with wider societal expectations and cultural context. Processes of institutionalization – and, in particular, diffusion and institutionalization across cultural borders – are covered by this study insofar as management concepts like CSR have been promoted as viable and enduring solutions to social problems on a global scale. As a consequence, discursive theorization activities – regarded as the central prerequisite of any institutionalization – constitute crucial elements of my analysis.

I will lay out in greater detail why the management concept of CSR has become increasingly important to the corporate world, including how CSR works and functions to assist corporations in managing legitimacy. Empirically, I am especially interested in (a) the field-level dissemination – i.e., adoption and indication of commitment – as well as (b) the reconstruction of meaning, and thus in the ongoing theorization of the concept. My research builds on previous work on systems of governance and corporate control as well as on the dissemination and application of various management concepts (for a brief overview see, for instance, Walgenbach & Meyer, 2008). As I will flesh out, the “tool kit” of organizational institutionalism, supplemented by essentials from discourse analysis, serves as an ideal conceptual background for my empirical study. Given the phenomenon of interest, such a project must be informed by the vast literature in the field of business ethics and CSR.

I will use the genre of annual reports of all Austrian publicly-traded corporations between 1990 and 2005 to provide empirical evidence (for more, see chapter on methodology). Explicit commitment to CSR in these documents – i.e., the “discursive practice” by which the debate on the business-society interface is reproduced by corporations – contains the multiple claims of all stakeholders regarded as “relevant”, but nonetheless also represents a key site of struggle over social meaning.⁹ The audience corporations address in annual reports and, hence, the instance to decide upon the appropriateness of corporate policies, is the general public.

Empirically, commitment to corporations' responsibilities can be conceived at various levels (see also Basu & Palazzo, 2008; for an overview of empirical studies see den Hond et al., 2007b): at the level of actual behavior, at a cognitive level, and at a communicative/rhetorical level. While all have their unique advantages in empirical research, only the latter leaves “time-authentic traces” that provide the

9 Corporations' self-presentation and their efforts to construct legitimacy discursively are the focus of attention, with the position and perspective of corporations being highlighted in particular. These actors represent the most central constituents of the CSR discourse, and can (re-)assign meaning to this management concept by the multiple and divergent ways in which they utilize and employ it (within the limits of the discursive repertoire available).

opportunity for the researcher to go back in time and construct a solid longitudinal dataset.¹⁰ The very ways corporations communicate their commitment to CSR and identify areas of responsibility, how they frame their statements, and how they choose to portray the organization's role within society provide a multitude of information – a source of comprehensive data which has yet to be fully exploited by academic literature. In addition, the majority of research into this field has so far focused more on particular sub-topics within the debate on CSR like, for instance, the mutual influence of social and financial performance (for an overview, see Margolis & Walsh, 2003; Orlitzky, Schmidt, & Rynes, 2003; Orlitzky, 2008) or social disclosure practices (Epstein & Freedman, 1994; Brammer & Pavelin, 2004; Vuontisjärvi, 2006, among others). Large-scale, longitudinal, and field-level studies on the dissemination and meaning of CSR in a continental European context are, to my knowledge, hardly available to date. This study, employing time-series cross-sectional data, also facilitates an analysis of temporal dynamics and shifts. Well aware of changes within the genre of annual reports itself, I will track and sketch the most striking developments of the concept over time.

In the following, I will organize my research questions in several clusters, each characterized by specific objectives.

Exploring the Austrian landscape. Before being able to pose and, subsequently, answer any research question, institutional research must explore in greater depth the landscape and empirical stage (i.e., the broader institutional framework in place). As will be argued, Austria qualifies as a potentially interesting setting to study the development or “career” of CSR and to illustrate related processes. An initial bundle of research questions thus aims at mapping divergent interests, institutional pressures, and demands for legitimacy from various “audiences”, as well as reactions from the corporate world – that is, also the question of whether CSR can be perceived as a “collective solution” for a “collective problem” in Austria. What are the general conditions¹¹ for CSR to go ashore in Austria? What is the relevance of the concept to Austrian business organizations? And how is this specific issue field structured in Austria (for instance, actors in the arena, regulations, explicit and implicit rules)?

Exploring adoption and dissemination. A second bundle of research questions addresses some shortcomings outlined above and is concerned with the dissemination of CSR as a globally diffusing concept and its specific career in the Austrian context. I am especially interested in understanding and explaining the specific characteristics of receptive organizations, or – to put it differently – which corpo-

10 I also assume annual reporting documents to contain manifold discursive traces and thus some reference to all three levels, as corporations must comment, justify, rationalize, and discursively legitimate their behavior to their key stakeholders and the public.

11 This should also reveal the more general opportunity structure (i.e., the broader set of political constraints and opportunities; for details, see Rucht, 1994; McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996; Tarrow, 1998, among others) for the dissemination of CSR in Austria.

rations are “at risk” of indicating adoption and commitment. In order to do so, I will test a broad set of hypotheses comprising both organizational (i.e., contingency) and institutional variables that potentially qualify as drivers of CSR. Moreover, the focus on business organizations' efforts to discursively obtain and manage legitimacy also links with specific discursive practices, and thus also with questions of significance of CSR and its placement on the agenda of today's corporations (see below for details).

Exploring theorization and assignment of meaning. Finally, a third bundle will go beyond existing work and the study of diffusion processes. Recognizing CSR as a comprehensive, dynamic, and discourse-shaped concept, this study also aims at the reconstruction of theorization activities (i.e., the investigation of the definitions and interpretations actors employ when drawing on this particular concept). To this end, one of the main contributions will be to illustrate issues of theorization and to reconstruct the meaning of CSR in Austria. More specifically, this embraces the ways in which corporations respond to pressure (i.e., how they theorize the problem, how they theorize the solution, and how they build a causal relation between the two). Several points merit attention here and will guide my research. First, it will be interesting to see which globally – or locally – available labels for CSR are actually adopted by corporations; a key task will therefore be to disentangle the overall discourse in various sub-discourses. Second, references made to particular groups of stakeholders and/or affected societal actors inform on the relevant social categories of actors in the context of CSR. Third, the topics corporations address when they refer to CSR, as well as the arguments and accounts they provide, communicate on the thematic embeddings of CSR. Fourth, I am especially interested in patterns at field level, in practice variation (e.g., Lounsbury, 2001), and in the heterogeneity of meaning under a common umbrella concept. In this sense, the study aims at detecting and reconstructing the structuring dimensions of meaning within the Austrian CSR discourse.

1.3 *Course of this study*

The course this study follows is largely predefined by the three bundles of research questions described above. After this introductory chapter, which briefly touched upon the overarching theme, outlined central problems and questions, as well as gave a general project outline, I will present, in Chapter 2, the current state of the field of CSR research. In more detail, I will discuss CSR as an essentially contested issue, elaborate on core elements and central framings, and will give a brief overview of existing concepts within the field. Chapter 3 is devoted to organizational institutionalism as the primary theoretical background of my work; the notions most relevant to and used in my research will be addressed. In Chapter 4 I will present methodological considerations and develop the methodical tools necessary

for carrying out my empirical research. Moreover, I will report precisely on sampling criteria, data, and methods of analysis.

In the empirical part of this study, I will draw on the genre of annual reports of Austrian publicly-traded corporations to analyze commitment to the management concept of CSR. Arguing that such concepts relate to specific models of governance and are thus dependent on the cultural embeddedness of organizations, I will start by presenting the empirical setting of my study (i.e., the Austrian context) in more detail in Chapter 5. A first chapter on findings, then, will be devoted to the career of CSR in Austria (Chapter 6). Here, I will argue and test a number of hypotheses that explain the dissemination and adoption of CSR, as well as central underlying mechanisms and relations. Upon presenting the results of several statistical models, I will discuss the findings in detail and draw initial conclusions. A second chapter on findings (Chapter 7) will focus on the reconstruction of meaning of CSR in Austria. I will present and discuss patterns at field level, dynamics within the discourse, as well as shifts and modifications over time. This will also permit an exploration of field-level processes of theorization and discourse as well as bring forward implications for the social construction of institutions. Both chapters on findings will discuss their specific contributions.

Toward the end of the study, some space will be devoted to a brief synopsis, as well as to key contributions and limitations of my research (Chapter 8). I will then present some thoughts on how this project and its findings can potentially inspire a future research agenda; I will report briefly on areas in which I have already begun research that continues along these lines. A few summarizing remarks will then conclude this doctoral dissertation.