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What is This?

Towards a progressive understanding of performativity in critical management studies

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Abstract

A central debate in critical management studies (CMS) revolves around the concern that critical research has rather little influence on what managers do in practice. We argue that this is partly because CMS research often focuses on criticizing antagonistically, rather than engaging with managers. In light of this, we seek to re-interpret the anti-performative stance of CMS by focusing on how researchers understand, conceptualize and make use of the performative effects of language. Drawing on the works of JL Austin and Judith Butler, we put forward the concept of progressive performativity, which requires critical researchers to stimulate the performative effects of language in order to induce incremental, rather than radical, changes in managerial behaviour. The research framework we propose comprises two interrelated processes: (i) the strategy of micro-engagement, which allows critical researchers to identify and 'ally' with internal activists among managers, and to support their role as internal agents of change; and (ii) 'reflexive conscientization' − that is, a dialogic process between researchers and researched that aims to gradually raise the critical consciousness of actors in order to provide spaces in which new practices can be 'talked into existence' through the performative effects of language.

Keywords

anti-performativity, critical management studies, micro-engagement, language, progressive performativity, reflexive conscientization

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Introduction

One of the main characteristics of critical management studies (CMS) − a multifaceted field within organization and management theory − is its critical stance towards institutionalized social and intellectual practices, such as the profit imperative, racial inequality or environmental irresponsibility. CMS research seeks to 'challenge prevailing relations of domination – patriarchal, neo-imperialist as well as capitalist – and anticipates the development of alternatives to them' (Alvesson et al., 2009: 1). As Adler et al. (2007: 2) put it succinctly, 'the common core is deep skepticism regarding the moral defensibility and the social and ecological sustainability of prevailing conceptions and forms of management'. A number of scholars who have been influential in shaping the CMS movement, however, express increasing concern that much of CMS research has only a marginal effect on what managers and organizations actually do (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2009; Grey and Willmott, 2005; Parker, 2002), whereas several researchers question the tendency of CMS scholars to articulate 'what they are against [rather] than what they are for' (Adler et al., 2007: 41; see also Clegg et al., 2006; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Spicer et al., 2009). Many of these critics point out that CMS scholars tend to adopt an anti-performative stance and hardly engage with those they criticize – predominantly managers (Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2005; Spicer et al., 2009).

Attempting to overcome the 'critical theory – management practice hiatus' (Hotho and Pollard, 2007: 585), some scholars have suggested that the root problem in prevalent managerial practices lies 'not in the profit motive itself but rather in the absence of *counterbalancing factors*' (Adler et al., 2007: 13; emphasis added). These factors include government regulations and non-monetary reward structures aimed at moderating the profit imperative, the inclusion of stakeholders in corporate governance, as well as 'simply […] more enlightened values among managers' (Adler et al., 2007: 13). Some CMS scholars have expressed optimism that such counterbalancing factors could drive positive organizational change and that promoting them could help increase the influence of CMS on management practice (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2005; Hotho and Pollard, 2007; Spicer et al., 2009). These suggestions, however, pose the question of how the promotion of such counterbalancing factors by CMS scholars would affect the way in which critical research is conducted and the role of anti-performativity in CMS.

To explore this question, we take Fournier and Grey's (2000) critical and influential examination of CMS as a starting point. In that study, the authors call for a more engaged variant of CMS that includes a rapprochement between theoretical purism and pragmatic action. Too much concern with the 'righteousness of critique' in CMS, as Fournier and Grey (2000: 22) argue, distracts from 'engaging with organizational practices and participants'. Our study follows their call for making CMS more relevant to practice and builds on Spicer et al.'s (2009) proposal for an alternative to what they consider the excessively anti-performative stance of CMS. Anti-performativity, according to Fournier and Grey (2000), eschews the production of (technical) knowledge that pursues a managerial agenda under the imperative of maximizing efficiency. As an alternative, Spicer et al. (2009) suggest a version of performativity that is based on active and subversive

interventions into managerial discourses by critical researchers, which they refer to as 'critical performativity'.

In this study, we narrow the multi-level framework of Spicer et al. (2009) to the individual level of analysis and sketch a research framework that focuses on micro-engagement with managers as a means of stimulating incremental social change. In doing so, we follow the suggestion of Voronov (2008) that (middle) managers could function as 'allies' to critical researchers and as agents of intra-organizational change. Indeed, several studies suggest that middle managers are key to triggering transformational change at the organizations for which they work (e.g. Balogun and Johnson, 2004; Daudigeos, 2013; Lüscher and Lewis, 2008; Reay et al., 2006). However, CMS is limited in such micro-engagement with managers as it 'might be more interested in reaching shop-floor employees rather than managers' (Voronov, 2008: 942). Engaging with managers at lower hierarchical levels − who are managers and subordinates at the same time (Watson, 1994) − and acknowledging their dilemmas, struggles and ambiguities (Adler et al., 2007; Meyerson and Scully, 1995; Spicer et al., 2009) could help unleash their potential role as internal activists.

Building on the strategy of active micro-engagement between CMS researchers and managers, we develop the concept of *progressive performativity* as a guiding principle for engaged CMS scholarship. Inspired by the view of performativity that Austin (1963) and Butler (1993, 1999) elaborated, we propose progressive performativity as an analytical concept that captures the 'incompleteness' of managerial acts that always remain subject to novel interpretations or re-interpretations. Progressive performativity involves processes of resignification (i.e. meanings that are open to re-interpretation) that guide managerial behaviour in different and possibly more reflexive directions. The notion of 'progressive' performativity reflects an optimistic stance that rests on the assumption that managers have a moral capacity (Watson, 1994) and the ability to bring about micro-emancipation. This term describes processes through which silenced sub-groups within organizations become sufficiently empowered to recognize and react to unfavourable social conditions, achieving 'small wins' that may lead to incremental social change (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Reay et al., 2006; Weick, 1984). The performative element, we suggest, requires researchers to 'activate' the language that managers use (see Austin, 1963). In that way, CMS scholars may support managers to 'talk into existence' new behaviours or practices that reflect the counterbalancing factors sketched above (Weick et al., 2005: 409). Here, language is understood as a medium that affects how people interpret their reality, how they assess things as important or unimportant, and how they feel and behave (Ferraro et al., 2005). On the basis of these assumptions, we argue that the research strategy of micro-level engagement may lead to *reflexive conscientization*. This term stems from the concept of 'conscientization', the English translation of the Portuguese word 'conscientização' (also translated as 'critical consciousness'), which was developed by the Brazilian pedagogue and educational theorist Paulo Freire in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970a). In our context, reflexive conscientization refers to establishing between researchers and managers continuous dialogic processes that provide spaces in which managers are gently 'nudged' to reflect upon their actions and the organizational processes to which their actions relate. In other words, we use reflexive conscientization to describe processes that raise the critical

consciousness of managers. This does not mean that critical researchers coerce managers into action or 'tell them what to do', but, as we argue, describes the processes that may lead managers to become aware of and reflect on their own participation in the discursive construction of organizational reality. In that sense, the performative effects of language provide opportunities to transform the prevailing organizational reality by gradually talking new practices into existence.

In the remainder of the article we will proceed as follows: after outlining the central tenets of CMS, we will examine its anti-performative stance. Drawing on a detailed discussion of the theoretical foundations of performativity, we will introduce a progressive interpretation of this notion. Following that, we will outline a research framework for engaging with managers and stimulating the performative effects of language in the context of CMS. We will conclude with a summary of this article's contributions to promoting the practical relevance of CMS, reflect upon complementary efforts such as critical management education, and acknowledge the limitations of our approach.

Critical management studies and anti-performativity

CMS builds on a heterogeneous body of meta-theoretical approaches. Critical theory, which has its roots in the work of the Frankfurt School, and Foucauldian poststructuralist analysis have played a key role in the formation of CMS (for recent overviews see Adler et al., 2007; Alvesson et al., 2009). In CMS, researchers, inspired by the tenets of critical theory, focus on identifying socio-political structures and processes in which the economic means of production and associated social structures are embedded, rather than on psychological aspects of human interaction (see Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). In contrast, the various strands of poststructuralist CMS research are 'centrally concerned with the critical role of language in organizing and performing our relation to the world' (Adler et al., 2007: 30). Although CMS encompasses a wide array of intellectual traditions, they all share a common purpose: to scrutinize organizational and management practices in order to identify the sources of domination and alienation, including repressive leadership, the suppression of underprivileged groups or minorities, or the exploitation of the natural environment through the prevalent means of production (Alvesson et al., 2009). Notwithstanding its theoretical pluralism and, to some extent, conflicting philosophical foundations, CMS research is broadly united by three core principles that distinguish it from mainstream management research: *anti-performativity, reflexivity* and *denaturalization*[1] (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000; Grey and Willmott, 2005).

The *anti-performative* stance of CMS echoes the refutation to 'develop and celebrate (technical) knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input and that involves inscribing knowledge within means–ends calculations' (Grey and Willmott, 2005: 17). From a CMS standpoint, '[n]on-critical study is governed by the principle of performativity, which serves to subordinate knowledge and truth to the production of efficiency' without questioning the means by which this is achieved (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17). In contrast, CMS questions the alignment between knowledge, truth and efficiency, and 'is concerned with performativity only in that it seeks to uncover what is being done in its name' (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 17).

Whereas non-critical and performative research is overtly concerned with enhancing efficiency or effectiveness (consider the appearance of 'performance' as a dependent variable in much of mainstream research), the critical approach focuses on uncovering socially adverse forms of power, control or inequality (Fournier and Grey, 2000). *Reflexivity* describes the continuous reflection on the presumed objectivism and universality of (scientific and popular) knowledge that allegedly dominates mainstream, especially positivist, thinking (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000). In CMS, reflexivity refers to the ability to recognize how management – whether practice or research – is influenced by the social positions of the actors involved and 'by the associated use of power-invested language and convention in constructing' organizational reality (Adler et al., 2007: 11).

Alvesson and Deetz (2000) suggest that CMS research can be further characterized by differentiating it on the basis of three core and partially overlapping processes: the generation of *insight* ('hermeneutic understanding in the critical tradition, archaeology to Foucault'), *critique* ('genealogy to Foucault, deconstruction to poststructuralists') and *transformative redefinition* (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009: 65). However, Alvesson and Ashcraft argue that the element of transformative redefinition, that is, encouraging alternative ways of constructing reality that are based upon previous insight and critique, remains underemphasized in much critical research and that CMS scholars tend 'not [to] step far beyond mere critique' (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009: 65). Indeed, there is increasing concern about the lack of contextually sensitive suggestions for alternative ways of remedying managerial or organizational misconduct (Kuhn and Deetz, 2008; Parker, 2002; Spicer et al., 2009). This lack is partly owing to the claim that much CMS research eschews to provide knowledge for dealing with those aspects of managerial life that have been identified as problematic. Furthermore, this anti-performative stance downplays the tensions and ambiguities that are inherent in managerial decision-making processes (Spicer et al., 2009) and overlooks potential points of engagement *with* managers that would make it possible to introduce the counterbalancing factors mentioned earlier into managerial activity.

In view of these shortcomings, we argue that CMS scholarship should pay more attention to how critical research can step beyond the generation of insight and critique and towards the process of transformative redefinition. We maintain that this process can be enabled through the direct engagement of researchers with organizational actors who are close to an identified source of a specific harmful activity. A case in point is the problem of child labour in supply chains: although it is important to scrutinize working conditions and intervene directly at the factory level (see, for example, the critical analysis by Khan et al., 2007), investigating the social constraints and moral dilemmas that burden the managers who took the decision to buy at that factory from a distant head office is an equally important way of approaching this problem. We will attempt to tackle these issues by developing a research framework for re-engaging with managers, promoting transformative redefinition and opening spaces for the introduction of the counterbalancing factors mentioned earlier into managerial activity. In the next section, we will attempt to re-interpret the dominant notion of anti-performativity in CMS in order to provide a solid conceptual foundation for our framework.

The problem with anti-performativity in critical management studies

The concept of performativity, which has been the subject of extensive debates across a variety of disciplines, can be traced to JL Austin's work in the 1950s − notably, the series of lectures he gave at Harvard in 1955 (Austin, 1963; for an overview, see Loxley, 2007). In this article we will also consider Lyotard's (1984) systemic understanding of performativity and Butler's (1993) idea of performative acts, both of which have their roots in Austin's conception.

Despite this concept's widespread philosophical roots, Spicer et al. (2009: 541) contend that 'most practitioners of CMS define performativity in a particular and narrow way'. According to them, the anti-performative stance in CMS builds mainly on Lyotard's (1984) argument that orthodox research is based on a system logic in which questions of justice are reduced to questions of efficiency. Lyotard further argues that the idea of performative knowledge whose sole purpose is to help establish the most efficient relationship between input and output is the corollary of the determinist conception of functional systems and the associated 'positivistic philosophy of efficiency' (Lyotard, 1984: 54). Scientific inquiry is thus (mis)used for the instrumental purposes of technological control and maximizing efficiency.

It is precisely this notion of performativity that Fournier and Grey (2000) picked up on when they argued that the anti-performative stance of CMS stems from the assumption that in performative management theory truth is subordinated to the dictate of efficiency. On the whole, critical scholars whose sceptical understanding of performativity is derived from Lyotard's view are generally pessimistic about its positive potential. This is hardly surprising given Lyotard's argument that researchers who fail to show how their work contributes even indirectly to enhancing the system's performance are 'doomed to senescence' (Lyotard, 1984: 47). Research based on Lyotard's version of performativity can therefore be criticized for its narrow focus on means–ends calculations, for fostering solely the efficiency of managerial practices, and for downplaying aspects of justice, equality or social responsibility.

The dismissal of the performative approach poses to anti-performative critical research the intellectual challenge of resisting the creation of performative knowledge that may block the space in which criticism could thrive (Hotho and Pollard, 2007; see also Adler et al., 2007; Fournier and Grey, 2000). In consequence, many CMS scholars tend to refrain from engaging too closely with managers, as Spicer et al. (2009) claim. Alvesson et al. (2009: 15) go as far as to argue that, regarding the appreciation of constraints of managers,

> […] for proponents of 'purist' CMS this may be unacceptably compromising. Any measure of sympathy for managers and other elites may be interpreted as a loss of nerve that renders CMS needlessly vulnerable to absorption within the progressive mainstream and thus disable its critical edge.

Although this statement might not fully reflect the heterogeneity of the CMS movement, it nevertheless suggests that among the proponents of CMS, 'purists' in particular identify a systemic incompatibility between business and society and doubt that free-market

capitalism and corporations, designed to amass shareholder value, are reconcilable with socially desirable outcomes (see Fournier and Grey, 2000; Kuhn and Deetz, 2008). Characteristically, this view tends to underemphasize the ambiguities that managers are often confronted with, and portrays them with little capacity for moral agency and willingness to change.

Grey and Willmott (2005) express discomfort with this tendency of negativity and one-sidedness that they discern in much CMS research, and argue that CMS 'should not involve an antagonistic attitude towards all forms of performing, [but] only to those forms of action in which there is a means–ends calculus that pays little or no attention to the question of ends' (Grey and Willmott, 2005: 7). Implicitly, they call for a re-interpretation of performativity and suggest that efficiency as a goal does *not necessarily* have to dominate other values, such as emancipation, democracy or ecological balance – in other words, there should be enough space for introducing the counterbalancing factors that we highlighted earlier. However, CMS research provides only limited guidance on how such values could be embedded into organizational practices and procedures in *collaboration with*, rather than in *opposition to*, managers. Below, we address this shortcoming and extend the interpretation of performativity following the direction that Spicer et al. (2009) have sketched in their multi-level concept of critical performativity.

Variants of performativity

In his seminal work, *How to Do Things with Words* (1963), Austin made a twofold distinction between descriptive and empirically verifiable utterances. He described utterances as speech acts and situations in which 'the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action' (Austin, 1963: 7). A speech act, that is, *saying* something, becomes *doing* something − hence the characterization 'performative'. Using language – oral or written statements or assertions – creates a social fact and may thus serve as a vehicle for 'talking into existence' a social reality that reinforces and validates what is being said (Ferraro et al., 2005; Weick et al., 2005). Austin, furthermore, argues that the non-performative view of language (see Loxley, 2007) in logical positivism is misguided and constitutes a descriptive fallacy. More precisely, he argues that language does *not* solely describe the external world. Consequently, utterances are *not* primarily statements that can be assessed empirically as either true or false but are constitutive of reality.

In Austin's view, the way in which people use language affects what they see, how they see it, and the social categories and descriptions they use to interpret their reality. It determines what people notice and ignore and what they believe is or is not important (Ferraro et al., 2005; Loxley, 2007). Accordingly, reiterating the importance of efficiency or profit maximization may lead actors to behave in ways that are consistent with this imperative and its underlying assumptions. Ghoshal and Moran (1996), for instance, have argued that justifying managerial actions on the basis of transaction cost theory, which is inherently sceptical of human morality, can influence the way in which managers speak about employment-related issues performatively. In other words, language affects how managers perceive themselves and their tasks, as well as how they make sense of their work and how they perform their tasks – an observation with far-reaching implications. It may equally allow stimulating managers to speak repeatedly

about alternative and more positively loaded subjects, such as social and environmental responsibility, and in doing so to commit themselves gradually to such goals. Reflection and commitment may induce actors to change their behaviour step by step so that it becomes congruent with the articulated goals. Taylor and Cooren (1997: 416) suggest that '[t]o state something is to perform an act'; that is, 'to say something implies […] that one believes it, and this makes an ordinary assertion in important ways parallel to such evident performatives as promising and threatening, which also imply commitment'. In other words, drawing on Austin, the authors argue that statements such as commitments or declarations can be seen as speech acts that aim to create the world that confirms their initial expression. Importantly, Taylor and Cooren add that a key condition for such 'aspirational talk' (see Christensen et al., 2013) to become performative and not just remain a blunt lie is to have 'a public ceremony, with witnesses' (Taylor and Cooren, 1997: 422). The participation of the critical researcher in this process therefore becomes essential, as we will outline below.

Austin's (1963) concept of performativity was elaborated by Butler in her work on gender (1993, 1999). Her basic claim is that we do not *express gender* as an essential inner identity but that we *become gendered* through our acts, which are related to the language we use, to how we move in space, as well as to our demeanour. Gender, she concludes, is performed rather than expressed. This does not imply that gender roles are exclusively culturally determined: as Butler argues, we come to be what we are by per-forming 'a stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, 1999: 179). Butler contends that such repetitive stylized acts are subject to the classificatory and regulatory effects of dis-courses, which provide a nexus in which the subject is constituted. Discursive norms, however, are not laws to be followed; they are 'law-like' in that they *can* be followed but, importantly, 'their spell can also be broken' (Loxley, 2007: 124). Acts of performing gender allow room for deviance because they are never complete, as they always remain subject to novel interpretations or re-interpretations. This incompleteness of performing acts opens the possibility of 'enacted critique' and 'subversive resignification', which may challenge and undermine prevailing norms. Thus, mis-performing acts intentionally offers enough leeway for 'decontextualizing' and 'recontextualizing' them through acts of 'misappropriation'. This kind of misappropriation, according to Butler, allows indi-viduals to elude the institutionalized relationship between words and deeds and, over time, may even break such connections (Butler, 1997). To sum up, Butler's main argu-ment is that identity is performed in everyday micro-acts that are subjected to discursive regulation, and that the repetition of these acts and their potential resignification provide space for subversion and change.

In their attempt to conceptualize CMS as a 'profoundly performative project', Spicer et al. (2009: 537) drew on the work of Butler and proposed that critical performativity could be viewed as active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices. Critical performativity echoes Fournier and Grey (2000), who distinguished a pragmatist, as contrasted to a purist, approach to doing critical research, characterized by emphasis on dialogue. In their article, Spicer et al. (2009) describe five tactics of engage-ment through dialogue. These tactics are based on the affirmation of ambiguity (proxim-ity to an object of critique to identify points of revision), the ethic of care (providing space for the respondents' point of view), pragmatism (working with particular aspects

of an organization), potentialities (hinting at plausible alternatives) and a normative orientation (approving 'good' forms of management). They involve various forms of engagement at multiple levels of analysis (the organizational field, the organization, individuals) with various constituent groups and include, for instance, engaging in dialogue with other (mainstream or orthodox) researchers and their theories, as well as civil society organizations or social movements.

In contrast to Lyotard's view on the dictates of technical knowledge and extending Spicer et al.'s arguments, the concept of progressive performativity that we put forward here aims to show that increasing the reflexive understanding of managers can unsettle the prevalent knowledge among this audience. However, we do not argue that critical researchers should provide what they perceive as 'better' technical solutions for managers. Instead, we suggest that CMS researchers especially, who should be well acquainted with the principles of reflexivity (see Fournier and Grey, 2000), could stimulate managers to consider previously overlooked choices and alternative behaviours that may counterbalance their quest for efficiency. Our proposal relies on the power of language to evoke transformational change in managerial behaviour and on a research framework that specifically focuses on the researcher's active engagement with managers (i.e. at the individual level of analysis). In that respect, progressive performativity extends the concept of critical performativity that Spicer et al. (2009) developed. Our overall proposition is that, if the negatively loaded language − for instance circling around transaction cost economics, as sketched above − can lead to corresponding negatively perceived consequences, then it may equally work the other way round and create more reflexive and ethically informed managerial behaviour.

Towards progressive performativity

In the following, we discuss how progressive performativity can be applied at the individual level of analysis. Our starting point is that managerial acts are incomplete, which provides spaces for reflexivity and processes of resignification and may ultimately trigger transformational change. Several studies on managerial behaviour point out that managers do not act rationally but instead make choices in highly ambiguous environments where outcomes, intentions and actions are not clear-cut (Hannaway, 1989; March and Olsen, 1982). By loosening the restrictions that rational, goal-directed and efficient managerial behaviour imposes, progressive performativity creates spaces for resignification in ambiguous managerial environments. Our concept of progressive performativity also rests on the assumption that managers possess a positive moral capacity (Watson, 1994) and the ability to achieve 'small wins' (Weick, 1984) − that is, to reflect on and take stepwise action in response to specific issues within an organization. The process of achieving small-scale changes, as we noted earlier, can be described as a form of 'micro-emancipation' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; see also Reay et al., 2006). In that respect, we follow many poststructuralist CMS researchers who argue that the classical emancipation discourse should be shifted towards the idea of micro-emancipation (Jones, 2009) with the intention to enable small-scale change and transformative redefinition (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The term 'progressive' connotes the idea of moving forward by actively working towards the incremental, rather than radical transformation of unfavourable

social conditions. Importantly, critical researchers need to 'activate' progressive performativity through the strategy of micro-engagement in order to establish spaces in which new practices can be talked into existence. In the process of micro-engagement, the use of language functions as a central mechanism that allows managers to orientate themselves towards progressive objectives such as environmental protection or gender equality (Alvesson et al., 2009). This may trigger gradual processes of change and, in doing so, introduce counterbalancing factors to managerial activity, such as increased reflexivity about one's own values and about the social impact of behaviour and decisions on others, such as subordinates.

To illustrate these theoretical claims, we draw on research on corporate social responsibility (CSR), which is broadly defined as a management concept for dealing with the social, environmental and ethical matters that business conduct typically encompasses, and for managing the relationship between business and society more generally (e.g. Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). The concept of CSR lends itself to the purpose of developing a research framework for progressive performativity, for two reasons. First, the CSR context provides a 'window' into corporate affairs; in other words, it allows critical researchers to focus on specific issues of concern within an organization and on engaging with specific managers. Many of the issues subsumed under CSR, such as promoting environmentally friendly means of production or establishing humane working conditions, are fairly close to the counterbalancing factors that CMS scholars have discussed at length (see Adler et al., 2007). Secondly, several studies on CSR illuminate the considerable performative consequences of language on how a concept is talked about, understood and ultimately enacted by managers (see, for example, Basu and Palazzo, 2008; Christensen et al., 2013; Daudigeos, 2013).

Basu and Palazzo (2008), for instance, argued that the verbal justification of (presumed) socially responsible behaviour influences how organizational members 'really' think about CSR-related issues and how they subsequently tend to behave. This argument has been supported by Daudigeos (2013), who has shown empirically that the use of rhetorical strategies is an important component to promoting stricter health and safety practices within an organization. In line with these studies and drawing on the idea of performative language, Christensen et al. (2013) have argued that CSR-related aspirational talk, that is, announcing ideals and intentions, rather than reflecting on actual behaviour (in that case, being socially responsible), may lead to the behaviour that actors have committed themselves to. The authors stress that even when the ambitions of becoming more socially responsible do not match managerial action, talking about these ambitions nonetheless helps articulate ideals, beliefs, values and frameworks for decisions that provide 'raw material for (re)constructing behaviour' (Christensen et al., 2013: 376). This echoes Butler's idea of recontextualization, where the articulated promise to change behaviour can be understood as a repetitive performative utterance, or, as Junge put it,

> . . . [it is] not the will [that] creates the obligation, but the utterance of the promise, may we will it or not. The performative act itself creates the motive to honour the promise […]. Whenever

> we say something that somehow affects others, we might be held responsible for having said it, and knowing this, we will feel committed to our words. (Junge, 2006: 286)

Even though, in the absence of action, talking about such ambitions may be reduced to 'cheap talk', declarations may become performative over time: 'it is in these spaces of difference [between words and deeds] that alternative ways of thinking […] and acting emerge' (Livesey et al., 2009: 426; cited in Christensen et al., 2013: 382). Based on these observations, we suggest that for CMS researchers the CSR context can serve as a point of departure for exploring the language that managers use and how they justify their practices.

A research framework for progressive performativity

Progressive performativity comprises two interdependent research processes: *micro-level engagement* and *reflexive conscientization*. The strategy of micro-level engagement aims to establish an intimate and trustful relationship between researchers and selected managers in an organization in order to challenge their taken-for-granted beliefs. This kind of close engagement enables CMS researchers to stimulate what we refer to as reflexive conscientization: a dialogic process in which the role of critical researchers is to encourage managers to reflect upon and discuss specific issues, thus opening spaces where new practices can be talked into existence. Through what Butler (1999) termed repetitive micro-acts, CMS researchers can trigger micro-change in a continuous and incremental, rather than a radical and disruptive, manner. This means working together with managers in order to prompt them to reflect actively on their behaviour and its social implications (e.g. discrimination at the workplace), rather than providing solutions from outside (see Spicer et al., 2009). It also means that researchers acknowledge the struggles and tensions that are part of a manager's daily routine and to identify situations where managers, especially middle managers at lower hierarchical levels, are confronted with moral ambiguities in their work (Jackall, 1988; Watson, 1994).

Scholars have argued that, especially in intermediate hierarchical positions, managers are more likely to be torn between their loyalties (see Adler et al., 2007). Therefore, middle managers in particular, such as the head of a department, a project manager or a team leader, in contrast to top executives or CEOs, appear more likely to be receptive to the strategy of micro-engagement. The former are more likely to be ambivalent about their own roles, but are at the same time closer than CEOs to everyday issues and to other employees and probably more willing to initiate small-scale change (Adler et al., 2007). Several studies provide compelling evidence about the transformational roles of middle managers in their organizations. Daudigeos (2013), for instance, has shown how middle managers with limited formal authority were able to employ unobtrusive influence tactics to manoeuvre around social constraints. His qualitative study illustrates how occupational health and safety managers improved safety at the workplace in various subsidiaries despite the constraints imposed by senior management and by the overarching organization. Likewise, the study by Reay et al. (2006) in the healthcare sector demonstrated that middle managers played a key role in promoting initiatives aimed at introducing organizational change. Middle managers, as the authors showed, were able to encourage front-line workers to become collaborators of their cause and thus facilitate change at the

upper organizational levels. Their empirical work suggests that these actors took advantage of their established networks and intimate knowledge of their work environments and triggered a series of actions designed gradually to change established and unfavourable patterns of work (Reay et al., 2006). As the empirical studies by Balogun and Johnson (2004) and by Rouleau (2005) emphasize, middle managers are important transmitters of initiatives for change; whereas top managers may provide strategic but non-specific direction to employees, the way in which middle managers interpret and customize such guidelines allows the latter to play a key role in configuring organizational change. Overall, the empirical evidence suggests that middle managers can be an effective 'target' for critical researchers who seek to work within an organization in order to bring about transformational change. We will now illustrate in detail the process of engagement at the micro-level and how this may facilitate the reflexive conscientization of managers.

Micro-level engagement

Engaging with middle managers at the micro-level is a precondition for triggering the process of reflexive conscientization. First, it allows critical researchers to work in close proximity to managers in a specific part of an organization (e.g. a division or a project team). Second, it allows them to address problematic issues, such as daily routines or specific tasks and aspects of managerial work, one by one. This reflects Clegg et al.'s (2006) argument that CMS researchers must become acquainted with and understand their object of critique before they go on to criticize it. Thus, the process of micro-level engagement should highlight the importance of the connections between the researcher and the researched, allowing the former to identify possibilities for working with, not in opposition to, managers.

The context of CSR provides particularly useful insights into how critical research can engage with managers at the micro-level – especially with 'CSR managers', who are also described as sustainability managers, environmental managers, or health and safety managers, and usually occupy middle hierarchical positions between top management and line employees. The available evidence suggests that CSR managers, who are responsible for integrating CSR-related practices into their companies, find themselves torn between conflicting economic and social or ethical rationales more often than 'conventional' managers, such as marketing or PR managers (Daudigeos, 2013; Visser and Crane, 2010; Wright and Nyberg, 2012). As a result, CSR managers often struggle to promote social or environmental objectives in their organizations – for instance, by introducing policies in line with human rights (such as avoiding suppliers who use child labour) and monitoring schemes for working standards at the company's supplier factories (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2013). Moreover, they often face opposition from their colleagues, who may consider them a threat to profitability and to the business's core interests.

Haack et al. (2012) illustrated these tensions in an empirical study of CSR in the financial industry. Their study examined the interaction and conflicts between the *protagonists* and *antagonists* of CSR in large multinational investment banks. The protagonists were mainly CSR managers; their antagonists were mainly bank employees, both at the same and at lower hierarchical levels (e.g. stockbrokers), who tended to support

narrower and predominantly profit-oriented objectives. For the latter, the costs and constraints associated with CSR activities such as lengthy stakeholder consultations 'pose a threat to [their] business' (Haack et al., 2012: 29). This led to tensions among CSR managers: 'Some people within banks are deeply frustrated about their employers. They want to push CSR further and get their point across, but it is difficult for them. There is a lot of resistance from within' (Haack et al., 2012: 29). Likewise, in Wright and Nyberg's (2012) study, sustainability managers saw themselves as agents of change and promoters of pro-environmental behaviour in their companies, but commonly faced resistance and scepticism from their colleagues.

Both internal conflicts among different groups of managers and the often socially oriented personalities of CSR managers (Wright and Nyberg, 2012) can serve as a foothold for CMS researchers who seek to engage with the promoters of CSR within companies. As Visser and Crane (2010) suggest, the protagonists of CSR may turn into internal activists and drivers of change. Accordingly, these individuals can act as vital sources of incremental resistance to entrenched practices and as promoters of alternative ideas and the internal transformation of their organizations (see also Reay et al., 2006). For example, in a study of Fortune 500 companies, Briscoe and Safford (2008) showed how internal activists influenced the spread of contentious practices, which gradually became accepted by those who initially opposed them within the same organization and among other organizations. The conflict between opposite groups of employees – the protagonists and antagonists – led to the gradual introduction of healthcare benefits for staff, including a ban on discrimination against gay and lesbian people. Although, quite clearly, this study is not an example of radical systemic change, it illustrates that such internal conflicts may lead to the stepwise introduction of change in managerial behaviour and of factors that contribute to more fairness and equality at the workplace.

Overall, this evidence supports our argument that there is a promising space for progressive CMS researchers who aim to identify the struggles that managers face in their organization and to work together with the protagonists of a particular cause or project within that organization in order to bring about positive changes. Such interaction between insiders (the 'protagonists') and outsiders (the researcher) is important. As Meyerson and Scully (1995: 597) argue, the insider's 'understanding of oppression and injustice can only be preserved by continuing to identify with outsiders'. From the vantage point of the outsider, a researcher is sufficiently detached from the organization to recognize problematic internal issues that he or she can address in cooperation with like-minded people (see Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Having established micro-engagement as the space where managerial knowledge may be challenged, we now turn to reflexive conscientization as the central mechanism of progressive performativity that can help bring about change in managerial behaviour.

Reflexive conscientization

The idea of reflexive conscientization is related to Weick's 'small-wins' approach (Weick, 1984), which involves breaking down large problems into smaller, manageable pieces and identifying 'a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results' (Weick, 2001: 427). Thus, 'small wins' describes the principle of

resolving modest problems and introducing changes on a small scale. Complex, unwieldy problems fill people with anxiety and limit their capacity to think and act creatively. The benefit of small wins as a strategy for social change is that it allows people to achieve a series of modest victories by tackling a number of small problems one by one instead of being confronted with an overwhelming issue. Importantly, as Weick (1984) suggests, the 'small wins' strategy can be applied not only to marginal organizational problems, but also to larger-scale issues of structural change, which can be 'sliced' into smaller elements and addressed step by step. Reay et al. (2006), for instance, report that middle managers relied on their organizational embeddedness to accomplish an escalating series of small wins that resulted in organizational change. Being familiar with their workplace and with other workers allowed them 'to recognize and sometimes even create the "right time" and the "right place" to take action' (Reay et al., 2006: 993). Below, we will show how the approach of small wins informs our conceptualization of reflexive conscientization.

'Reflexive conscientization', as we explained in our introduction, refers to the process of establishing continuous dialogue between researchers and managers in order to provide spaces in which managers are 'nudged' gently to reflect upon their actions and the organizational processes to which these relate. In that way, conscientization opens up spaces in which new practices can be 'talked into existence'. As we explained earlier, our concept of *reflexive conscientization* was inspired by the notion of 'conscientization', which was popularized by Paulo Freire (1970a). Conscientization, according to Freire, describes a process in which people, through dialogical encounters, 'achieve a deepening of awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality' (Freire, 1970b: 452). Ideally, such encounters provide spaces that enable 'reflection and positive action upon [the] world' (Freire, 1970b: 452) by allowing individuals to analyse critically the cultural environment that shapes their behaviour. The process of reflection, which is based on how individuals perceive their social reality and its inherent contradictions, is thereby inextricably linked to taking subsequent action.

Importantly, reflexive conscientization does not mean that critical researchers attempt to coerce managers into acting in particular ways or to dictate their behaviour – something that Freire would reject as 'domestication' of knowledge (Freire, 1970a). Instead, as we argue, this strategy aims to help managers become more aware of and reflect on their participation in the discursive construction of organizational reality. In this context, dialogue is an important tool for bringing to the surface ingrained assumptions and expanding established beliefs (Tsoukas, 2009). More specifically, reflexivity helps managers explore possibilities for transformation, and the performative effects of language provide opportunities for changing the current organizational reality by gradually talking new practices into existence. As Freire put it (albeit without an explicit reference to the performativity of language), 'to speak a true word is to transform the world' of knowledge (Freire, 1970a: 87).

Haack et al.'s (2012) study provides tentative evidence of the reflexive conscientization processes that may take place in an organizational context. The authors show how internal CSR activists, metaphorically described as 'Trojan horses' (Haack et al., 2012: 830), helped spread attention to CSR issues inside their organization. They also describe how other functional managers, who had initially denied that their behaviour

was reprehensible and rejected any sort of responsibility for what they were criticized, gradually became influenced by the continuous aspirational talk that the protagonists of CSR used. Showing clear signs of increased reflexivity about their actions, the antagonists entered the process of reflexive conscientization by 'singing their critics' song' (Haack et al., 2012: 34). As they became increasingly aware of the impact of their actions on social and environmental conditions, they were 'nudged' to reflect on what they said and to justify both their talk and often the lack of corresponding practices to their own stakeholders, including some of their colleagues. Eventually, they recognized the need to engage in constructive dialogue with their critics and to establish practices that were consistent with their words. Conceivably, managers who continuously reflect on and speak about specific moral policies – and in doing so commit themselves rhetorically to adopt them – are more likely to align their acts with their words in order to avoid guilt and embarrassment (Christensen et al., 2013).

In a similar vein, Meyerson and Scully (1995) report that insiders can effect change by provoking those in power to acknowledge their own talk and commitments and consequently a sense of personal accountability. In their study of corporate ethics officers, the authors showed that lower-level employees appropriated the ethics talk of managers to reinforce their own claims to more ethical treatment. This worked particularly well in those companies that had previously made at least a superficial commitment to promoting ethical behaviour – pledging, for instance, to prompt colleagues to treat 'each other fairly, with dignity and respect' (see Meyerson and Scully, 1995: 597). Once such language had been espoused publicly by managers, employees used it to push for actual changes that were consistent with what was being talked about. The fear of losing credibility persuaded managers to be responsive to claims put in the same language that they had used. This example shows that, as a result of reflexive conscientization, the antagonists of CSR may begin to identify with the language of their internal and external critics and translate it selectively into a version that they eventually apply in the form of new managerial practices.

Obviously, merely talking about potential scenarios of change does not imply an instant change in behaviour, values or beliefs. Nevertheless, reflexive conscientization can initiate the process of resignification that Butler developed (1997). Whereas micro-engagement with managers allows room for decontextualization, reflexive conscientization can support the process of recontextualization. As the previous empirical examples highlight, reflexive conscientization can provide spaces that 'activate' the performativity of language and thus lead towards behavioural change. Social psychology theories, in particular the theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), support our argument that this is not yet another instance of academic romanticism. More specifically, cognitive dissonance theory and psychological research on attitudes and behaviour more generally suggest that people experience significant social pressure 'to appear and be perceived as consistent in words, beliefs, and deeds' (Leana and Barry, 2000: 757). In other words, according to cognitive dissonance theory, people tend to align what they say with what they actually do. For instance, even if managers only pretend to implement certain CSR practices symbolically, by signalling commitment without fulfilling it, eventually this might lead them to act on their promises (Christensen et al., 2013; Haack et al., 2012). In a similar context, Schurman and Munro (2010) demonstrated how social

movements generated change in business practices by introducing new cognitive frames with which managers had to contend as they sought to legitimate new products and expand their operations. To give an example, the authors argue that 'the most profound impact of anti-biotech activism was to establish the distinction between genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and non-genetically modified organisms as the defining social and technical fact [that characterized] all GMOs as unnatural, uncontrollable, and ultimately unpredictable' (Schurman and Munro, 2010: 185). In this case, the introduction of new cognitive frames induced managers gradually to change the way in which they justified particular types of behaviour and to narrow the scope of socially acceptable actions. Thus, although this strategy did not eliminate the use of GMOs in a radical way, nonetheless it sowed the seeds from which the gradually increasing societal rejection of such organisms sprang.

On the basis of this evidence we argue that the task of CMS researchers should be continuously to point out ambiguities and engage in dialogue with managers in order to stimulate language that highlights potential courses of progressive action in an organization. The role of CMS scholars as 'outsiders' is particularly important in this context, because their critical stance could help to expose problems (such as ethical conflicts or socially harmful consequences of behaviour) that are hidden beneath the daily routines of managerial life. In order to have an effect, however, this requires critical researchers to put forward suggestions – for instance, ways of establishing meaningful dialogue between the protagonists and antagonists of CSR. This would require actors to recognize the conflicts between corporations and civil society that are reflected in incongruous language use: corporations often use the logic of self-interest to justify their actions, whereas civil society posits the logic of social needs (Basu and Palazzo, 2008). Self-interested justifications, however, are problematic, for two reasons: (i) instead of facilitating dialogue, they suppress critical voices (Ashforth and Gibbs, 1990; Basu and Palazzo, 2008); and (ii) as Swanson (1999) has argued, the narrow linguistic repertory of self-justification systematically marginalizes the concerns of external socially oriented audiences, who are not always able to present a business case for solving ethical problems. Basu and Palazzo (2008: 127) suggest that a new 'ethical justification might be envisioned, whereby an organization explains the reasons for its actions as derived from "cosmopolitan" or "higher order interests"'. This would involve aspiring to more socially inclusive goals of human welfare, as well as addressing issues such as mitigating discrimination or harassment at the workplace or eliminating child labour along the supply chain. In the next section we will describe how critical researchers can make use of the performative effects of language in order to develop and project scenarios of 'good' (i.e. reflexive) management practice and bring about progressive change in corporations.

Field methods for progressive performativity

For progressive performativity to work in practice, researchers need to have at their disposal a range of adequate field methods for establishing micro-engagement with managers and creating spaces in which reflexive conscientization can unfold. This includes being able to identify the protagonists of a cause inside an organization (e.g. CSR managers) and to uncover the internal struggles and moral ambiguities that managers face. We

suggest that critical ethnography and critical participatory action research offer a promising combination of field methods (see Duberly and Johnson, 2009) for these purposes. Whereas ethnographic research generally provides detailed insights into the micro-processes that take place in organizations, critical ethnography differs from conventional ethnography in that it not only seeks to interpret the informants' worldviews, but also aims to question and challenge it by stimulating processes akin to reflexive conscientization (Duberly and Johnson, 2009). Moreover, combining the problem-solving elements of critical participatory action research with critical ethnography would help thwart the frequent criticism that critical ethnography has little impact on the subjects it studies, whereas participatory research has a 'soft' critical edge (Duberly and Johnson, 2009).

Alvesson and Willmott (1992) have pointed out that researchers who employ critical ethnography acknowledge the complexity, ambiguity and inconsistency that characterize language use and the practices associated with it and at the same time try to avoid naturalizing 'ideology, power, and communicative distortions (including the ambiguity of language) that are an integral part of management and organization' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 454). When conducting field research, the critical ethnographer is not limited to observing but can also offer novel knowledge that is useful to a particular group. For example, although not being explicitly 'critical' in the CMS sense, Lüscher and Lewis (2008: 238) conducted what they describe as 'paradoxical inquiry'. In that approach, the researcher's role is to encourage the exploration of alternative modes of thinking, new perspectives, and different ways of constructing reality that may lead to the transformation of existing conditions. Importantly, this shows how a researcher can stay clear of providing ready-made 'efficient' or 'technical' solutions to those researched. The main merit of this approach is that, through reflexive dialogue between managers and researchers, it can help the human subjects of the research to become more conscious of conflicts, ambiguities and moral issues (see Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). Likewise, Schweiger et al. (1989: 747) report how the research technique of 'dialectical inquiry' and 'devil's advocacy' served to stimulate debate among participants about key assumptions, prevented 'uncritical acceptance of the seemingly obvious' and helped to 'tap the knowledge and perspectives of group members'. Dialectical inquiry requires groups to challenge each other's propositions until a common agreement is reached. In devil's advocacy, one group rejects the other group's recommendations by pointing out flaws but without proposing an alternative. The first group revises their ideas and this process continues until agreement is reached between the two groups.

In the context of progressive performativity, critical researchers would need to take on an active participatory and moderating role that is not restricted to observation but extends to supportive action-oriented intervention. Their role would be to act as co-agents of change, and their aim would be to stimulate social transformation through collaboration with individuals within an organization (see Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2009). This attitude is exemplified by the 'sparring sessions' that Lüscher and Lewis (2008) introduced. During those sessions, the authors met with managers to discuss what concerned the latter, and to pose supportive but provoking questions that served as a basis for working jointly on solutions. Having critical researchers espouse such a role is a central element of progressive performativity. Instead of providing technical and more efficient performative knowledge, the engagement of critical researchers with managers

should foster the decontextualization of technical knowledge and support its recontextualization through dialogic interventions and space for reflexivity.

This type of inquiry, together with the 'small wins' approach, could, for example, be pursued if critical researchers joined multi-stakeholder fora concerned with CSR issues such as the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) or smaller local stakeholder-driven initiatives. Such initiatives provide guidelines for the organizational implementation of socially and environmentally responsible business practices. Although substantial criticism against such initiatives should be acknowledged (e.g. Banerjee, 2007), we suggest that they nevertheless have an important function in helping to create spaces where different stakeholder groups – including company representatives such as CSR managers (mainly middle managers), civil society organizations, social movements and academics – can engage in dialogue that challenges and may unsettle the views of the other participants. One of the authors participated in several UNGC stakeholder meetings in the course of the present research (e.g. the UNGC Leaders Summit in 2007 and in 2010). Although the usual keynote and ceremonial addresses were delivered by high-profile CEOs, these meetings included many smaller workgroups in which CSR managers and other non-executives were asked to discuss with civil society representatives what actions stakeholders could take to promote social change towards more inclusive business practices, such as fair working conditions. Although all this might be dismissed as a merely rhetorical exercise, as we showed above, aspirational commitments can prompt participating managers to raise awareness of problematic issues among their colleagues, increase their own reflexivity about prevailing management practices, and ultimately bind them to their commitments.

In light of the above, the guiding principle for the kind of critical research we have outlined here should be what Kincheloe and McLaren (1998; see also Duberly and Johnson, 2009: 363) refer to as 'catalytic inquiry' – namely, 'the extent to which research changes those it studies so that they understand and think about the world in new ways and use this knowledge to change it'. In a similar vein, the categories of knowledge utilization devised by Pelz (1978) further clarify how the 'output' of research that follows the principle of progressive performativity would ideally look like. More precisely, progressive performativity reflects what Pelz calls the 'conceptual utilization' of knowledge (Pelz, 1978). As we have illustrated, from an anti-performative perspective, language functions as an instrument of managerial power for increasing efficiency and consolidating the status quo. In progressive performativity, by contrast, language is used as a vehicle for micro-emancipation, reflexivity and change, and seeks to stimulate 'ideas, concepts, or scientific research results [that] influence how a practitioner conceptualizes a problem', without requiring of the critical researcher to prescribe specific and predetermined courses of action (Pelz, 1978, cited in Astley and Zammuto, 1992: 452).

As a supplement to the active role of critical researchers that we elaborated above, self-reporting methods have been applied successfully – for instance, in studies of managerial work – and appear to be a promising tool (for an overview, see Hannaway, 1989; for an empirical example, see Balogun and Johnson, 2004). Self-reporting is an unconventional method that helps establish a certain level of intimacy between the researcher and the researched. In our context, this method might make the protagonists of a cause, such as CSR managers, more willing to engage with critical researchers who offer to

support their cause. More concretely, self-reporting would involve equipping managers with 'paper-and-pencil' diaries or audio-recorders to tape their everyday experiences with intra-organizational antagonists. At a later stage, participating managers would be asked to relate their personal experiences to their counterparts in situ in order to convince them or at least engage them in discussion. They would also be asked to assess whether the concept of reflexive conscientization has actually had a performative effect, either on themselves, or on the counterparts. Self-reporting methods also have the important function of 'action-monitoring', which provides both researchers and managers with a better sense of whether the overall discourse stays focused on the key issues that have been discussed in previous meetings. Moreover, it may be used as a tool for encouraging reflexivity among those managers who are willing to engage with critical researchers by providing continuous updates on novel problems.

Discussion

In the course of elaborating the notion of progressive performativity, we have made an attempt to rethink some of the ideological premises of CMS and to develop ideas about how critical research could become more relevant to what managers in organizations actually do. We have argued that the problem with much anti-performative research is that it refrains from engaging with those it criticizes and that it often dismisses managerial constraints and dilemmas and thus disregards the contradictions that managers face. As a result, anti-performative research misses out opportunities to support managers and help them to trigger social change within their organizations. We have addressed these shortcomings – on the basis of our arguably optimistic assumptions – by drawing on the 'humanist rejoinder' to CMS (Adler et al., 2007: 38), namely that managers should be seen as actors who have the potential for empathy, justice and a sense of civic responsibility, and may feel profoundly ambivalent towards the moral dilemmas they face.

On the basis of these premises, we developed a progressive variant of performativity that conceptualizes how critical researchers can activate the performative dynamics of language in order to facilitate 'small wins' and incremental change within an organization. The research framework we propose rests on the research strategy of micro-engagement, which allows researchers to identify specific problems (decontextualization), and on the mechanism of reflexive conscientization, which employs positive language to redirect the perceptions and behaviour of organizational members in relation to the spotlighted problems (recontextualization). The empirical evidence we drew on to underscore how the use of positive language can bring about shifts in the behaviour of managers (Briscoe and Safford, 2008; Christensen et al., 2013; Haack et al., 2012) lends support to our argument that reflexive conscientization is not a utopian ideal. In this sense, the CSR context and CSR managers can be seen as exemplary 'carriers' of processes of incremental change.

We should note, however, that progressive performativity should not be understood as a turn away from anti-performative research but should be seen as a necessary complement. Anti-performative studies play an important role by uncovering and spotlighting problematic issues in managerial and organizational life, such as the example of child labour that we cited earlier (see Khan et al., 2007). Our argument is that the idea of

progressive performativity can enhance CMS scholarship and enable it to have greater impact on what managers actually do. Thereby, we contribute to the CMS literature by elaborating Fournier and Grey's call (2000) for a more engaged variant of CMS that includes rapprochement between theoretical purism and pragmatic action. We also contribute to existing research by building on the efforts of Spicer et al. (2009) to make CMS a profoundly performative enterprise and by showing how progressive performativity could help to achieve the transformative redefinition of managerial actions to which Alvesson and Deetz (2000) drew attention.

Although empirical evidence supports the applicability of progressive performativity and underscores the effects of reflexive conscientization, our proposals have some limitations. First, micro-engagement with managers is only one way of making CMS more relevant to practice. Although our focus was on discussing CMS research, we acknowledge that other approaches, such as critical management education (e.g. Grey, 2004), are equally important, and that investigating how 'progressive' CMS research and teaching could inform each other represents a promising avenue for future research. Second, we base our concept on a rather optimistic conception of human agency and of the ability to transform or at least influence structural forces in organizations. Although optimistic, our view is supported by the empirical findings of Reay et al. (2006), as well as Daudigeos (2013), who have shown that the embeddedness of actors, such as middle managers, in organizational structures may enable rather than constrain agency. Our assumption that managers (more specifically, internal activists) are in principle willing to engage with critical researchers is equally optimistic, but is supported empirically (see Lüscher and Lewis, 2008). In practice, this might not always be the case, so critical researchers need to tread carefully when they approach managers and initiate joint projects. Furthermore, we rely on another optimistic assumption, namely that internal activists are relatively free from the need to gain influence and power. This reflects the idea that managers do not necessarily use influence only to exploit or suppress their subordinates but, as the evidence on CSR managers shows (e.g. Wright and Nybert, 2012), that they may also use it to promote a progressive agenda.

A further limitation is that reflexive conscientization may not necessarily work as we have depicted. Nevertheless, on the basis of the empirical evidence we have provided above, we argue that it *could* work. Admittedly, our empirical evidence is tentative and this question needs to be investigated further. Indeed, studying the validity, inner workings and boundary conditions of reflexive conscientization is a promising line of future critical research. Moreover, the elements of progressive performativity – namely, micro-engagement and reflexive conscientization – provide a good conceptual starting point for in-depth empirical work. If critical researchers understand these processes better, they will be able to use them more purposefully to engage with managers and to stimulate the kind of progressive change that we have sketched. Although middle managers − CSR managers, in particular − seem more likely to be receptive to progressive performativity, future research should also explore opportunities to engage with other potential agents of change that influence managerial behaviour, such as consultants, and investigate other areas that can serve as entry points into corporate affairs.

Conclusion

In this article, we made an attempt to reconceptualize performativity in CMS research by basing it on the general assumption that managers have a positive moral capacity and the ability to decontextualize and consequently recontextualize their actions. We named this concept 'progressive performativity' to reflect the progressive effects of performative interventions. Our aim was to offer CMS scholars a novel approach to engaging closely with managers and to activating the performative effects of language. We suggested that, if critical researchers engage in dialogue with managers, this may lead the latter gradually to align their language with their actions – a process we referred to as 'reflexive conscientization'. We have to acknowledge that our understanding of performativity is not exhaustive. As is the case with philosophical terms, much controversy surrounds performativity (see McKinlay, 2010). The notion of progressive performativity that we put forward here is only one attempt to stimulate a debate on how performativity might be conceptualized in a way that could help CMS scholarship become more relevant to what managers actually do.

Note

1. Most CMS research draws on all three principles. In this article, however, we focus on anti-performativity and reflexivity. *Denaturalization* involves questioning the assumptions and taken-for-granted imperatives of the mainstream management theories, ideologies and institutions of established organizational life, such as hierarchy or the efficacy of markets (Alvesson et al., 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000).

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