Dominant Articulations in Academic Business and Society Discourse on NGO–Business Relations: A Critical Assessment

Salla Laasonen · Martin Fougère · Arno Kourula

Abstract Relations between non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and companies have been the subject of a sharply increasing amount of publications in recent years within academic business journals. In this article, we critically assess this fast-developing body of literature, which we treat as forming a 'business and society discourse' on NGO–business relations. Drawing on discourse theory, we examine 199 academic articles in 11 business and society, international business, and management journals. Focusing on the dominant articulations on the NGO–business relationship and key signifiers they rely on, we analyze the problem-settings of articles in order to reveal the statements that are acceptable and appropriate within this field. Our threefold aim is to (1) identify dominant articulations of NGO–business relations in business and society discourse, (2) expose those articulations that are silenced or suppressed by these dominant articulations, and (3) critically assess possible power effects of these discursive dynamics in the field of discursivity. While business and society discourse on NGO–business relations overall remains open to many different articulations, we also find that those articulations that focus on NGO–business partnerships and governance initiatives tend to privilege collaborative and deliberative ways of engaging and marginalize more adversarial subject positions. We call for more recognition of the potentially constructive role that can be played by conflict.

Keywords NGO · Discourse theory · Business and society · Critical · Deliberative democracy · Agonistic pluralism

Introduction

Mary's company had a partnership with an NGO, and everything was win–win–win. And everywhere the company and NGO went together, the world became a better place. They went to the UN one day, which was against the rules. It made the diplomats laugh and play, to see a company at the UN.

Not quite the expected conventional opening sentence of an introduction to an academic research article? Let us try again.

In a globalized world, businesses, nongovernmental organizations, and governments need to work together in order to address existing social and environmental challenges. Now this is more like it.

Quite likely, the above sentence did not evoke as puzzled a reaction as the first paragraph? This is meant to demonstrate how we expect the language in an introduction

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to mirror the dominant logic and content of a certain field. We expect certain phrasings and citations that guide us to a certain research tradition or stream. What is most noteworthy, however, is that when we follow the unwritten rules of the established contents of an introduction, we simultaneously reinforce the dominant articulations of a certain discourse, understood broadly as a shared or "particular way of talking about and understanding the world, or an aspect of the world" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 1). These articulations are usually taken-for-granted, established statements that go without further examination or notice.

In this article, we argue that there is a need to critically analyze such taken-for-granted statements. We wish to contribute to the recent call for a critical management studies (CMS) turn in business ethics by Prasad and Mills (2011), by particularly focusing on these established statements on the relationship between business and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In CMS terms, our endeavor can be described as one of 'denaturalization', i.e., a matter of exposing how certain articulations "become taken-for-granted while, concurrently, alternative visions and modes of organizing are systematically silenced" (Prasad and Mills 2011, p. 230). In academic literature, NGOs have traditionally been mainly associated with the watchdog role in society, pushing both governments and companies to amend the environmental and social ills of globalization. In the 1990s, the case of Shell's Brent Spar and Nike's child labor in its supply chain have marked their place in history as cases that epitomize—and in some ways certify—the adversarial NGO–business relationship (e.g., Van Tulder and van der Zwart 2006; Grolin 1998; Zyglidopoulos 2002). Considering the growing number, influence, and potential for nuisance of NGOs (Bendell 2000; Boli and Thomas 1997; Doh 2003; Teegen 2003; Powell and Steinberg 2006), it has for instance been argued that "firms ignore environmental activists at their peril" (Hendry 2003, p. 267). Interestingly, in 1992 (i.e., before the Shell and Nike PR crises), the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro declared *partnership* as a key to sustainable development. Nearly 20 years later, Porter and Kramer (2011) declare that capitalism is in crisis, and that we are in desperate need of "shared value", a concept which blurs the line between for-profit and nonprofit organizations and calls for business and society to join forces. Thus, alongside the watchdog role of NGOs (Spar and La Mure 2003), we can witness an attempt to turn "gadflies into allies" (Yaziji 2004), respond to "the partnership challenge" (Austin 2000), and many other roles ascribed to NGOs (for a review, see Yaziji and Doh 2009).

How have the different types of relations, including conflicting ones such as adversarial versus partnership,

been integrated into the academic discourse, what does the discourse look like now and what power relations may it reflect, reinforce and redistribute? In order to try and answer this question, our contention is that in the first place we need to expose as contingent what has become in a sense obvious within business and society literature discussing this relationship; or rather what has become so obvious that its truth status is no longer questionable. Only by seeing the taken-for-granted articulations as contingent can we start to problematize the potential power effects that these articulations may have. We treat the studied literature (from 11 leading journals in business and society, management and international business, IB) as forming a 'business and society discourse' on NGO–business relations, and in turn we see this discourse as competing for hegemony within the 'field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 111) of NGO–business relations, which involves other academic discourses such as a 'social movements discourse' and a 'governance discourse'. Here, we relate these different 'discourses' to different institutional affiliations in terms of publication outlets. We are aware that this is an artificial distinction but we make it for the sake of clarifying what we mean by 'discourses' as distinguished from—and together constituting—the whole 'field of discursivity', i.e., all discourse touching upon the topic of NGO–business relations, which may include contributions from many different academic disciplines. As these different discourses all generate knowledge— and thus make truth claims—about the same phenomenon, they are competing with each other but they are also complementing and informing each other—as well as informing for instance policy discourses. Our threefold aim is to (1) identify dominant articulations of NGO–business relations in business and society discourse, (2) expose those articulations that are silenced or suppressed by these dominant articulations, and (3) critically assess possible power effects of these discursive dynamics in the field of discursivity.

For this purpose, we analyze 199 article problem-settings on NGO–business relations from 11 business and society, IB, and management journals—we consider that this literature can be considered as representative of academic 'business and society discourse' on NGO–business relations. In the following sections, we first present our methodological approach on discourse theory, followed by an overview of the data. In the analysis section, we discuss what we find to be the dominant business and society articulations on NGO–business relations and what articulations they may silence or suppress. The implications of these findings are presented in the analysis and discussion section relating to the possible power effects in the field of discursivity and the need to reincorporate the currently suppressed articulations.

Discourse Theory as Methodological Approach

Our methodology of discourse analysis is mainly inspired by Laclau and Mouffe's (1985; Laclau 1990, 1993) 'discourse theory' (see also Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Skålén et al. 2008), the terminology of which makes it possible for us to articulate more clearly a methodological approach and an analytical framework that can address our aim in an insightful way.

Our Discourse Theory Approach

Discourse theory helps in investigating 'relations' between signifiers. In Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, p. 105) understanding, discourse is constructed through 'articulation' which is all about "establishing a relation among elements". A discourse theory approach is particularly applicable to our study, since the discursive domain we are investigating (NGO–business *relations*) is defined in terms of relations between different actors (and their associated signifiers). A discourse theory approach entails treating academic knowledge in the field, and the statements that are acceptable or appropriate within this field, as contingent: a field of knowledge develops in a certain way but could also develop in other ways. From a discourse theory perspective, it is important to characterize the discursive domain of NGO–business relations. It does not constitute per se an academic discipline and cannot be argued to constitute one 'discourse'. Instead, the 'field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 111) that it defines is characterized by articulations within different academic bodies of literature, such as for instance (1) business studies broadly put (and mostly business and society studies, forming a 'business and society discourse'), (2) social movements theory, and (3) governance. Since we are looking at articulations found only in outlets institutionally related to the first body of literature above, we do not claim to examine the whole field of discursivity, but rather the articulations of NGO–business relations from within business and society discourse—although we also in turn reflect on possible power effects in the field of discursivity.

In line with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, p. 112) discussion of the logic of hegemony, we consider any discourse as 'constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of difference, to construct a centre'. Hence, in our discussion we will return to how articulations of NGO–business relations within academic business and society discourse: may (1) 'attempt to dominate the field of discursivity' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 112); and (2) connect across disciplinary divides with other discourses, appropriating and rejecting articulations from them in order to construct hegemonic articulations, i.e., those potential articulations that would succeed in 'dominating the field of discursivity' by fixing the meanings and relations between elements. Our contention is not that business discourse indeed dominates the field of discursivity at the expense of other discourses, but that all articulations *attempt* to do so. In doing so, they need to draw on other legitimate, and sometimes more dominant, discourses when competing over establishing knowledge of the phenomenon at hand—while they may also contribute to silencing other important discourses. All these discursive struggles for hegemony in turn have power effects, for instance through policy recommendations from powerful actors such as the United Nations (as in the example of the 1992 Rio Conference and its agenda framed in terms of 'partnership'). We do not claim that academic discourse alone makes all the difference for empirical reality, but that it both reflects existing power relations and has the potential to reproduce them and contribute to redistributing them.

That the discourses *attempt* to fix meanings through hegemonic articulations does not mean that the field of discursivity is ever fully closed by such a fixation of meanings and relations. Discourse can always be opened up—and academic discourse, in particular, tends to be problematized very often (a central characteristic of academic work). In addition, in a field of discursivity that is in essence cross-disciplinary, and all the more so when the different discourses coincide with the primacy of different actors (whether the discourse is business-centered, social movement-centered or chiefly concerned with contemporary governance challenges), it is much harder for one discourse to dominate the field of discursivity, and even for one discourse to be closed around one dominant articulation.

Bearing these limitations in mind, we seek to identify dominant signifiers and their relations in articulations of NGO–business relations found in academic business and society discourse. Based on previous reviews of the literature and our pre-understanding, one expectation we had was that the business and society discourse on NGO–business relations would be characterized by the increasing dominance of the signifier 'partnership' at the expense of other types of relations. In other words, our pre-understanding pointed towards 'partnership' being one of the 'nodal points'—i.e., "the privileged discursive points of [the] partial fixation [of the field of discursivity]" (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, p. 112)—of the field of discursivity defined by NGO–business relations. As we will demonstrate in the analysis and discussion section of this article, our pre-understanding of 'partnership' as a nodal point was not confirmed to the expected extent, and instead other perspectives emerge that somewhat blur the overall picture and keep business and society discourse on NGO–business relations remarkably open.

Focus on Problem-Settings

In order to examine dominant articulations in NGO–business relations, we focus on the problem-settings of articles, i.e., the parts that set the problem in the abstract and introduction.[1] The rationale behind focusing on the abstract and the introduction, as discussed above, is that the problem-setting of an article is typically revealing of what are acceptable and appropriate statements within the field of discursivity and within the more specific discourse—here, academic business and society discourse.[2] This is because the argument that serves as a starting point for the article needs to be grounded in what has been established in the field.

Our discourse theory inspired method differs considerably from, e.g., bibliometric analyses (e.g., de Bakker et al. 2005). In the latter, the focus is on which articles gain and maintain influence within a certain field of literature. The analysis builds on citations and how they relate to each other, seeking out the most influential pieces of work. By contrast, in our analysis the influence of an article, or its results and conclusions, are not in focus at all. The introduction is expected to contain the dominant articulations established within a discourse competing for influence within the field of discursivity, regardless of the influence of the results and conclusions. Therefore, it should be clear that we are not criticizing the authors or their views. The objective is rather to reveal what articulations of NGO–business relations have become accepted and dominant within business and society discourse, how they relate to other discourses competing for dominance within the field of discursivity, and what power effects these dominant articulations may have.

Sampling and Analysis of Articles

In terms of journal and article selection method, we replicate the selection criteria used in a recent thematic review on NGOs by Kourula and Laasonen (2010). We do this because the scope of journals and sampling methods are suitable for our purposes. By replicating the sampling method, we also have an opportunity to critically reflect on the findings of the review. Compared with the data set of 88 articles in the review, our analysis includes 199 articles. The review focuses on how the relationship between NGOs and business has been examined in business and society, management, and IB literatures—which we argue form together an extended 'business and society discourse'. In business and society literature, four key journals are identified: *Business Ethics Quarterly* (BEQ), *Business & Society* (BAS), *Business Strategy and the Environment* (BSE), and *Journal of Business Ethics* (JBE). BEQ and JBE are considered to be the leading journals in business ethics and corporate social responsibility, BAS is the leading journal in its field and BSE is an important journal in the area of environmental management and CSR. In terms of management research, the five main academic-oriented (non-practitioner) journals from the Financial Times 40 list are chosen: *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ), *Academy of Management Journal* (AMJ), *Academy of Management Review* (AMR), *Organization Science* (OrgSci), and *Strategic Management Journal* (SMJ). Similarly, the two IB journals in the Financial Times 40 list, *Journal of International Business Studies* (JIBS) and *Management International Review* (MIR), are chosen as key journals representing IB.

The timeframe for our analysis is from 1998 to 2009. At the time of analysis, all articles published in 2010 were not available, and this is why we could systematically analyze all articles only until 2009. However, we chose to include two highly relevant special issues on the topic from 2010 (in *Business & Society*, which includes three articles added later in December 2010, and *Journal of Business Ethics*). These special issues have a specific role in the data as they resemble 'hegemonic interventions', i.e., discursive interventions "whereby alternative understandings of the world are suppressed, leading to the naturalization of one single perspective" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 37). By calling for a focus on specific ways for businesses and NGOs to relate to each other, these special issues have the inevitable effect to re-frame the discourse around one main perspective; determining whether this is a deliberate attempt to make this effect long-lasting in terms of a closure of discourse is outside of the scope of our analysis, as we focus on the possible effects themselves, not on supposed intentions. Therefore, our analysis contains altogether six special issues with altogether 49 articles. The first special issue on partnerships was issued in 1999 in *Business Strategy and the Environment*. Apart from the first special issue, all articles would fit our selection criteria in any case. The second special issue is from 2008 in *Administrative Science Quarterly* on "Social Movements in Organizations and Markets". The third and fourth are in *Journal of Business Ethics* in 2009 on "Business Partnerships for Development" (Vol. 90, Supplement 1) and "Fair Trade" (Vol. 86, Supplement 1). The 2010 special issue in

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[1] In some articles, no "introduction" headline is provided. Instead, a common replacement of that is a first section that clearly substitutes an introduction, based on the content. We have treated these first sections as introductions in such cases.

[2] Although useful and applicable to the vast majority of the articles, the problem-setting approach proved to be inadequate in some cases. In some articles, the introduction was employed for purposes other than establishing the research purpose and background, for example, presenting methodology. In these cases the primary source was the abstract.

Business & Society is on the "Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in the Business–Government–Society–Interface" (in two parts), and the 2010 special issue in *Journal of Business Ethics* is on "Cross-Sector Social Interactions". Altogether seven special issue articles that did not fit our primary selection criteria based on title, abstract, and keywords were included based on the relevance of the introduction.

The primary method to identify relevant articles was reading the title, abstract or author-supplied abstract, and introduction one by one.[3] For the eleven journals, all abstracts of all articles available through Business Source Premier (EBSCO), ABI/INFORM ProQuest, or Scopus electronic databases were read to make sure that no relevant articles were left out due to the variety of concepts and terminology associated with NGOs.[4] The criterion of including an article was some reference to the NGO–business relationship in title or abstract.[5] For the purposes of this article, we focused on NGOs working in the fields of world polity, welfare, the environment, human rights, and community development. If civil society or local communities were mentioned, the requirement for inclusion was that a reference should be made to some kind of group or organized action. The mention of political parties, trade unions, professional and business associations was not a criterion for inclusion. Intergovernmental Organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations (UN) and International Organization for Standardization (ISO) are also excluded as a sole criterion for inclusion (although the latter can be considered a quasi-NGO).[6] Social Accountability 8000, AA1000 and Fair Trade studies were criteria for inclusion, since SA8000 and AA1000 are NGO-led certification mechanisms and Fair Trade labels are usually NGO based. Since very few management and IB article abstracts referred to NGOs, articles with indirect references were included more easily than for business and society journals. From 2008 onwards, however, the need to remain open to new articulations on NGOs, e.g., relating to social entrepreneurship, became necessary. This closely relates to one of the main findings in the analysis: defining roles and boundaries becomes increasingly challenging towards the end. Apart from the above-mentioned exclusions, in some problem-settings NGOs are mentioned in some implicit form but the relevance to the article remains trivial. Decisions about inclusion/exclusion of those articles were made after careful discussions between the three authors on each article individually. For the benefit of the reader, we have added all analyzed articles to the reference list. In order to form a sufficiently accurate understanding of 199 problem-settings, they were all coded on spreadsheets (see Table 1 in Appendix). This phase involved interactive researcher triangulation in which the analysis method was compared, made transparent, and agreed upon. Several example problem-settings were analyzed together in order to unify the coding method. Throughout all the phases of the analysis, unclear cases were opened up for discussion among the authors. Most importantly, the backgrounds of the three authors was taken into account and employed as an advantage in the analysis: two of the authors are experts in the field of substance, while the third author has special expertise in critical analysis in general, and a broad interest in business and society discourse. Working in such a combination thus enabled reflexivity and transparency concerning prior knowledge, an issue that is always difficult to address. Thus, we were able to use researcher triangulation in a very extensive manner.

After having unified the coding technique used to characterize the problem-settings on the spreadsheets, we divided the journals between the three authors. We began the coding systematically by extracting all the relevant signifiers and passages in the problem-settings, identifying how NGOs, businesses, and relationships between them were articulated in the text. We noted occurrences of discursive distinctions between 'old-ways' and 'new-ways' of representing the NGO–business relationship, and 'more common' and 'less common' ways for NGOs and businesses to relate to each other. We considered the 'new-way' and the 'more common' as discursive interventions clearly indicating that certain relations are established as more acceptable and of increasing importance. Whenever we identified articulations that otherwise looked to us as 'discursive interventions' (notably when the authors explicitly emphasize certain types of NGO–business relations over other accepted ones) or 'discursive tensions' (especially articulations that sound

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[3] Electronic databases do not always make available special issue articles, for example, Doh and Guay (2004). Articles not available through these electronic databases are not included in the analysis.

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[5] A topic area not included in the review is studies where NGOs are the unit of analysis but not in relation to business. Although not included, it can be stated that such studies exist both in the fields of business and society (Knox and Gruar 2007; MacDonald et al. 2002; van Oosterhout 2006) and management (Galaskiewicz et al. 2006; Huxham and Vangen 2000; Lawrence et al. 2002; Majchrzak et al. 2007; Osterman 2006). In addition, a few studies had a comparative setting between NGOs and businesses (Brower and Shrader 2000; Cordano et al. 2004; Egri and Herman 2000). These were excluded because the focus of the analysis is on the relationship between NGOs and businesses.

[6] A specific topic that was not included in this analysis is ISO standardization. Although not examined here, it can be stated that there has been important research conducted on ISO 9000 and 14001 standards in business and society (Darnall 2006), international business (Christmann and Taylor 2006), and especially in the field of management (Benner and Tushman 2002; Boiral 2007; Guler et al. 2002; King et al. 2005; Terlaak 2007).

contradictory), we included them in the spreadsheet. Throughout the analysis we compared and discussed our findings, and opened up ambiguous cases for discussion.

Once all problem-settings had been systematically coded as per the signifiers they use, the lead author categorized all problem-settings in terms of their most emphasized 'NGO–business relationship model'—one per problem-setting. This led to the problem-settings being divided into seven initial categories: 1) pressure-response, 2) dyadic partnership, 3) soft-law governance, 4) trisector governance, 5) blurred roles, 6) alternative business models, and 7) other. From that stage on, the analysis consisted in identifying 'dominant articulations' that could be traced *within each category*. After a first analysis of these dominant articulations based on the six categories, we found that (1) the biggest category (pressure-response, with more than 60 problem-settings) was too diverse for dominant articulations to be identified within it, and (2) the distinction between types of governance-related categories (trisector governance and soft law governance) prevented us from looking into dominant articulations of governance. The two lead authors then revisited all the articles with a resulting new categorization that helped in (1) analyzing the pressure-response problem-settings through determining subcategories based on the different foci, and (2) identifying dominant articulations within the governance-related problem-settings. Those categories that we finally agreed upon are as follows: 1) pressure-response, 2) dyadic partnership, 3) governance, 4) new business models and blurred roles, 5) different relations equally emphasized, and 6) other. They denote implicit common denominators in the problem-settings, but it should be clear that they are the result of an interpretive process. This process, employing researcher triangulation, was of course driven by an attempt to clearly identify the main NGO–business relations emphasized in the problem-settings. But it was also affected by reflections on initial results based on the previous categorization, and in particular, the felt need for one governance category and for a category representing those problem-settings that refer to several kinds of relations without emphasizing one over the others.

Different Articulations of NGO–Business Relations: An Overview

The differences in terms of journal aim and scope, number of annual volumes and issues, and special issues have a significant impact on how the overview on the analysis looks like. Overall, the number of articles rises extremely sharply during the last years of our analysis period (Fig. 1). As many as 84 relevant articles were published in 2008 (26 articles) and 2009 (58 articles). The amount of articles published in JBE largely account for this sharp rise. Out of

the 199 problem-settings included in the analysis, as many as 108 are from JBE. This is due to not only considerable interest in the Business–NGO relationship, but also the greater number of volumes and issues published in the journal. The total number of articles amounts to 199 when the special issue articles from 2010 (BAS and JBE) are included.

Scope of Each Journal

As mentioned, JBE accounts for the majority of the articles in our analysis (Fig. 2), and the 108 articles in JBE cover the widest range of subjects. JBE also includes three special issues in the analysis. BAS accounts for the second largest amount of articles in the analysis with 28 articles. The journal displays significant interest in the topic, even excluding the 2010 special issue on "Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in the Business-Government-Society Interface". In contrast, BEQ tends to be very theoretical and less focused on NGO–business relations. BSE, as the journal name implies, has a focus on environmental management, and the journal also includes articles that focus on responding to NGO pressure.

As expected, the IB and management articles account for a smaller share of the articles (33 out of 199). All ASQ articles deal with social movements and the analysis includes social movement articles from a special issue on the topic (Vol. 53(3)). From the relatively few NGO–business articles in remaining management articles, the adversarial role of NGOs is well represented. What is notable in SMJ is that all articles set out to solve how companies can defend against external pressure: all articles assign NGOs with the adversarial role. While this is in logical coherence with the journal, the unanimously shared approach is interesting. Finally, and interestingly, JIBS continues to include only one article by Teegen et al.
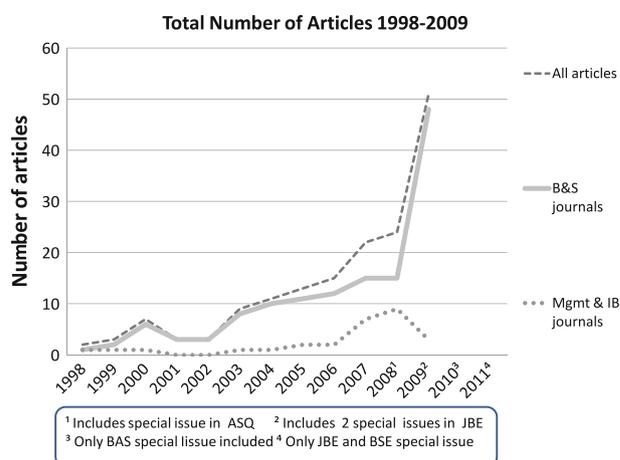

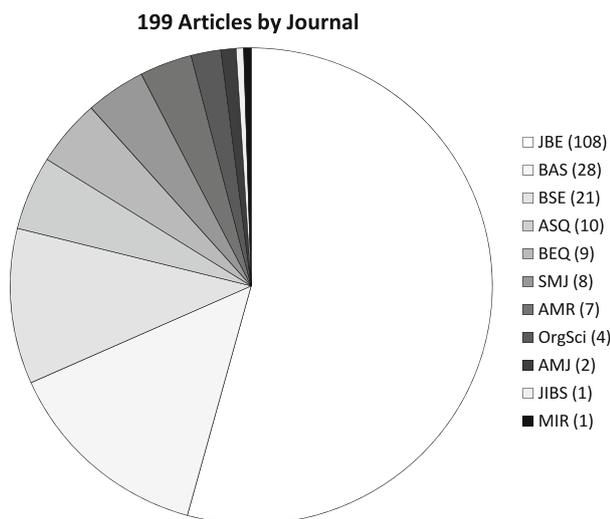**Fig. 1** Total number of analyzed articles

199 Articles by Journal

JBE (108)
BAS (28)
BSE (21)
ASQ (10)
BEQ (9)
SMJ (8)
AMR (7)
OrgSci (4)
AMJ (2)
JIBS (1)
MIR (1)

Fig. 2 Division of articles per journal

Blurred Roles (28)
Governance (65)
Dyadic partnership (31)
Pressure-response (62)
Different roles (4)
Other (9)

Fig. 3 Development of NGO–business models

(2004) which introduces NGOs to the IB research community. Likewise, MIR includes only one article by Scherer and Smid (2000), which discusses the limitations of the state and intergovernmental organizations to improve social and environmental conditions. Overall, NGOs remain of marginal interest in mainstream IB journals.

Categorization of NGO–Business Relations

Based on our categorization, a significant proportion of the problem-settings (126 out of 199) build on either a governance-related relationship (65) or a pressure-response relationship (62) between NGOs and businesses. In addition, 31 articles build on dyadic partnerships. However, as Fig. 3 demonstrates, these relationships do not account for the whole picture. We find entirely new forms of NGO–business relations. In the 'new business models and blurred roles' category, it is difficult to assign distinct roles of either NGOs or business. Rather, those roles converge in a way that has not been detectable before, such as "social ventures" (Easterly and Miesing 2009), "collective projects" (Weber et al. 2008). Similarly, we find 'new business models' that have non-profit elements built in a convergent way, for example "Fair trade innovators" (Özçağlar-Toulouse et al. 2009), and "distinctly "social" enterprises operating as NGOs or CSOs [civil society organizations] that are engaging in business opportunities and practices" (Waddock 2010, p. 11). The 'blurred roles' are closely intertwined with the 'alternative business models' category. By and large, the articles that fall into this category deal with fair trade, due to the JBE special issue, as a competing business model.
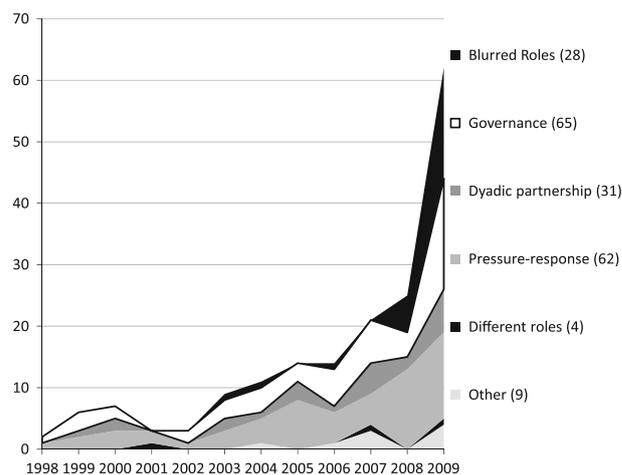
While the proportion and orientation of different models remains relatively steady over time, the role of special issues provides new insight to the picture. As the themes of the six special issues indicate, dyadic partnership, trisector governance and sectoral blurring dominate the articles. The role of the pressure-response model is significantly lower in the special issues; only 4 out of 49 articles build on a pressure-response model. In line with discourse theory, it could be argued that this more adversarial model is 'suppressed' in the contributions to the special issues, as a result of their calls for papers, which are framed in such a way—though some are more open than others—that the focus is more on collaborative relationships (whether through dyadic partnerships, trisector governance or emergent hybrid forms).

On the whole, the pressure-response model still seems to be the most commonly referred to at least as a reference point (including possibly to be contrasted against) in the problem-settings. However, many new roles appear, and the distinctions between the roles on both sides of the NGO–business relationship become increasingly blurred. Articulations of blurring can even be depicted in some pressure-response model articles (e.g., Fassin 2009). In the following section, we present the findings of our analysis in more detail, with extensive citations from the articles.

Dominant Business and Society Articulations on NGO–Business Relations

In our analysis, we focus on dominant articulations within business and society discourse rather than on the statistical proportions. We do not claim that all the main discursive trends we identify constitute dominant articulations for business and society discourse as a whole but rather that they constitute articulations that have reached a high level

of acceptance (and lack of questioning) *within* each category. Below, we first discuss the pressure-response category. This category is the most diverse one, and thus the most challenging for tracing dominant articulations. We then move on to other important categories and the dominant articulations that characterize them.

NGO Pressure, Business Response

The common feature of what we call pressure-response problem-settings is a pressure from NGOs as the motive for business reaction: they describe a way of relating that can be characterized as dyadic antagonism. The focus may be on how NGOs target business, or on how business responds to those actions—or on both. It is difficult to trace dominant articulations among these 62 problem-settings, largely because the foci and tones vary immensely. If we eliminate those 6 problem-settings in which NGO–business relations are only mentioned in passing and not at all in focus, we can examine more closely the 56 remaining problem-settings, out of which we find exactly 50% (28) to be business-focused, 16 to be NGO-focused and 12 to be interested in both NGO pressure and business response in a rather balanced way. Out of the 28 business-focused problem-settings, 3 see the pressure-response relation as a business opportunity, 10 see it mainly as a threat to business, and 12 discuss it rather neutrally or both as opportunity and threat, while the 3 remaining problem-settings are clearly critical of business. Overall, those business-focused problem-settings can be seen as quite 'managerial' in nature, with instrumental benefit in mind—notably, articles from *SMJ* are quite well represented in the 'neutral or both opportunity and threat' subcategory (5 out of 12, with additional problem-settings from management journals such as *AMR* and *AMJ* in this subcategory), such as for example:

> With the increasing prominence of special interest group activity in the organizational external environment, we build on the stakeholder literature on strategic management to explain how organizations respond to pressures from such groups. (Julian et al. 2008, p. 963)

The 16 NGO-focused problem-settings can be divided into 6 that see the pressure-response relation as an opportunity for the NGO, 9 that discuss it rather neutrally or both as opportunity and threat, and 1 that is clearly critical of NGOs. While some of these problem-settings do not hint at possible managerial implications for business—notably, some articles from *ASQ* that were part of the special issue on social movements and that did not have any implicit business perspective—a number of them do have an

implicit managerial dimension, and some are even explicit on this, for example:

> Stakeholder activism has become a common occurrence in corporate life and a genuine managerial issue, as environmentalists, employees, community groups, human rights organizations, and charitable organizations increasingly use a variety of strategies to influence firms' actions. (Rowley and Moldoveanu 2003, p. 204)

> In recent years, environmental nongovernmental organizations have succeeded in influencing the operations of numerous business firms. The suggestion that a company's actions pose a threat to human health or the natural environment can have long-term consequences for the firm's reputation. (Hendry 2003, p. 267)

So overall it can be argued that the majority of pressure-response problem-settings have a managerial dimension, although we would not go as far as calling this managerial dimension, which takes many shapes, a 'dominant articulation'.

Now, it is also interesting to say a few words about the 12 problem-settings that are interested in both NGO pressure and business response in a rather balanced way, out of which 4 see pressure-response relations as an opportunity for society, 3 see it as a threat for society, and 5 are more neutral. The problem-settings that are emphasizing the benefits of pressure-response are particularly interesting here as they are among the few—among all the included problem-settings—that articulate the value of adversarial relationships for value creation at the societal level, rather than just thinking in terms of the interests of certain types of organizations. These problem-settings articulate the importance of 'dialogue' or 'debate' between the adversaries:

> […] much of the real action occurs – in the Dialogue that occurs when corporations and shareholder activist groups mutually agree to engage in ongoing communications to deal with a serious social issue as an alternative to the formal vote on a shareholder resolution. (Logsdon and van Buren 2009, p. 354)

Overall, however, even the problem-settings focusing on both NGO pressure and business response rarely hint at the value of adversarial relationships for the societal good from a more normative and theoretical perspective. Unlike the often normative articles on partnerships and/or governance, the more theoretical articles on pressure-response tend to be more neutral and descriptive. It seems that an articulation of adversarial relationships as potentially good for society—and for instance democracy—may be suppressed as a result of the more instrumental nature of most article aims.

From Adversaries to Partners

One key interest here is on how NGO–business relations are articulated in the problem-settings as having evolved over time: first, how they are claimed to have been in the past, and second, how they are claimed to be now. In our systematic analysis, we have specifically focused on articulations of an 'old-way' of the NGO–business relationship versus a 'new-way' that would be more legitimate at the time of writing the article, for example:

> The once adversarial relationship between NGOs and companies [old-way] has undergone a shift toward becoming more cooperative and more dialogic in form [new-way]. (Kourula and Laasonen 2010, p. 36)

We found that, in those problem-settings that discuss an evolution of the relations over time, the most common characteristic for the 'old-way' is an adversarial NGO–business relationship, while the 'new-way' is typically characterized by a move to partnership and collaboration:

> Companies are pursuing more proactive [new-way] rather than reactive environmental strategies [old-way], resulting in partnerships [new-way] between industry and other societal groups […]. (Hartman et al. 1999, p. 255)

> [corporate political strategies] from antagonistic… [old-way]… to more cooperative [new-way]. (Kolk and Pinkse 2007, p. 202)

> The early forms of business-NGO relations were mostly confrontational [old-way] […] These new forms of collaboration between business and NGOs reflect broader changes in the overall governance environment, while contributing to the reconstitution of the global public domain where firms carry out their activities. [new-way] (Albareda et al. 2007, pp. 175–176)

> They [NGOs] have attenuated their confrontational adversarial style [old-way], exhibiting a more favorable collaborative inclination in the context of CSR […] Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have in specific been active in recent years, more attuned to CSR, and more willing to collaborate with businesses in pursuit of common goals [new-way]. (Jamali and Keshishian 2009, p. 277)

> The cooperative imperative [new-way] has started to transcend some of the divides [old-way] between business, nonprofits, and governments […]. (Vurro et al. 2010, p. 39)

Similarly, when we focus on articulations of 'more common' and 'less common' a similar main trend can be identified:

> Environmental non-government organizations (NGOs) are increasingly favouring cooperation [more common] over traditional protest and confrontation [less common] to encourage environmentally sensitive corporate practices […]. (Stafford et al. 2000, p. 122)

> Predominantly since the 1992 Rio Summit, corporations have been increasingly pursuing partnerships with public institutions including governments, international organizations and NGOs that aim to contribute to sustainable development activities [more common]. (LaFrance and Lehmann 2005, p. 216)

> Partnerships between businesses and nonprofit organisations are an increasingly prominent element of corporate social responsibility implementation [more common]. (Seitanidi and Crane 2009, p. 413)

> Such insight into the influence of value systems on the actual actions of pressure groups [less common] might also be valuable in the light of the ever increasing number of strategic partnerships between NGOs and the private sector [more common]. (Scherrer 2009, p. 555)

As shown above, the narrative of moving 'from adversaries to partners' is one of the clearest trends among those that appear in the problem-settings throughout the analysis period. This narrative can be seen as a dominant articulation. It is not only visible in articles on dyadic NGO–business partnerships but also in articles describing governance challenges in a neutral or balanced way (e.g., Kolk and Pinkse 2007) and in articles with several types of relations equally represented (e.g., van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2010):

> Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an active role in influencing companies to increase their corporate social responsibility (CSR; Carroll 1991; Elkington 1997). Over the past decade, there have been more collaborative interactions between businesses and NGOs, including stakeholder dialogs and partnerships (Calton and Payne 2003; Glasbergen, 2007; Teegen et al. 2004; Van Huijstee, Francken, & Leroy, 2007; Van Huijstee & Glasbergen, 2007). However, some NGOs reject collaborative interaction with businesses (Ählström & Sjöström 2005; SustainAbility, 2003) preferring to take a confrontational position toward companies (cf. Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004; Visseren-Hamakers, Arts, & Glasbergen, 2007; Winston, 2002). (van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2010, pp. 591–592)

Interestingly, in the latter citation the usual narrative is found, but with a twist: it is still possible for NGOs to opt

for confrontation rather than collaboration. This is the only problem-setting where this twist is clear and explicit. More importantly, in none of the problem-settings is the narrative 'from adversaries to partners' specifically problematized as a misleading way of representing the evolution of the relationship. In this sense, it seems like there is a high level of acceptance in the field for this understanding of the evolution. Thus, our role here is to open this accepted narrative up for questioning. In particular, the narrative itself may tend to suppress the notion that more adversarial relationships are not only still possible but also possibly getting more common. Here, we need to acknowledge that among the articulations of dyadic partnerships, there are some critical undertones:

> […] corporations that seek to successfully partner with CSOs [civil society organizations] should be wary that such collaboration is not in line with the strategy of all CSOs, and that for the same reasons the prevailing partnership promotion might be problematic. (Ählström and Sjöström 2005, p. 230)

> Critics are invited to join dialogue programs and mediation processes regarding controversial issues […] or even to get involved in long-term alliances with companies […] Some observers argue that such forms of stakeholder engagement can help to foster a form of "civil regulation" in which nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) assume the role of setting and monitoring standards in cooperation with business […] Yet alliances and cooperation may also imply the "co-optation" of critics into the decision making of business if stakeholders participate only symbolically in decision making without exerting any actual power. (Holzer 2008, p. 50–51)

However, these critical considerations remain undertones because they do not constitute the main focus of these problem-settings. They display balanced articulations of partnerships (acknowledging pros and cons) which is certainly valuable. But no article can be construed as a deep questioning of the dominant win–win–win (i.e., that companies win, NGOs win, and society wins) bias in the partnership literature since none of them takes an explicit critical perspective focusing on the systematic deconstruction of the win–win–win. This may be down to the general genre that characterizes business and society literature, where win–win–win rhetorics typically dominate and critical arguments need to be brought up in a balanced way giving credit to positive aspects too. Hence, it is ironic that Holzer (2008) makes the explicit critical point that there is the risk for critics to be 'co-opted' if they choose to participate in business decision-making: In some ways, Holzer's interesting critique is itself co-opted into mainstream business and society discourse. More radical critiques are left to those management and organization journals that have promoted CMS as part of their own mainstream—none of which is included in our sample.

Addressing the Governance Gap: Trisector Partnerships and Soft Law Governance

A clear dominant articulation in the problem-settings relates to the very common contention that contemporary governance challenges cannot be addressed through traditional governmental types of actions due to the inability of governments and intergovernmental organizations to effectively regulate internationally and/or globally. This dominant articulation is particularly visible in the problem-settings that relate NGO–business relations mainly to governance issues – by focusing on (1) trisector partnerships/governance, (2) soft law governance, or (3) broad international governance challenges—but it is also traceable in many problem-settings focusing on dyadic partnerships (e.g., Hartman et al. 1999; Jamali and Keshishian 2009; Mukherjee Reed and Reed 2009; Scherrer 2009) and even on pressure-response (e.g., Fassin 2009). It can be found in articles published throughout the 1998–2010 period:

> […] traditional 'command-and-control' regulatory approaches to address the planet's environmental challenges have led to too much reliance on government as the sole caretaker for the environment (Sinding et al. 1998; Wylynko, 1998). Environmental problems, such as climate change, have become increasingly too complex to be solved solely by government (Norberg-Bohm, 1998; Wylynko, 1998), and sustainability warrants alternative forms of leadership and contributions from industry, citizens, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and other environmental stakeholders. (Hartman et al. 1999, p. 215)

> The power of individual nation states to define the rules of the economic system and to influence the policy of MNEs is fading (Vernon 1998). At the same time, the efforts of intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations, the International Labour Organization, or the World Trade Organization have not yielded much progress in enforcing social and environmental standards for business world-wide. Though paperwork has been done for decades, these organizations are still unable to enforce and control business conduct effectively because they depend on the executing bodies of individual nation states. (Scherer and Smid 2000, p. 352)

Modern society is challenged by a loss of efficiency in national governance systems values, and lifestyles. (Palazzo and Scherer 2006, p. 71)

Although there has been a growing mass of legislation over the last couple of decades, governments have not yet been able to adequately address these social and environmental issues on an international level. (Gilbert and Rasche 2008, p. 756)

[…] it becomes clear that the world's most pressing public problems such as poverty or global warming call for cross-sector solutions. (Maak and Pless 2009, p. 537)

In a world of 'governance without governments' (Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992) – or at least with the role of government substantially downplayed – cross-sectoral initiatives have increasingly filled some of the gaps. (Crane 2010, p. 17)

While the power of government is argued to be fading, NGOs are portrayed as increasingly powerful agents (whether through collaborating with or balancing against business) to fill in the governance gap:

Their [NGOs'] role has specifically been accentuated/ brought to the fore at a time when governments have failed to solve social problems and have diminished in scope. (Jamali and Keshishian 2009, p. 277)

[…] substantial reduction in the powers of the nation state […] Due to this new redistribution of power, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) gained momentum and started to play an increasingly decisive role in the political and social arenas. (Scherrer 2009, p. 555)

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and pressure groups have taken up the mission of counterbalancing the huge power of the multinational corporations […] As power gives responsibility, NGOs should be seen as having corporate stakeholder responsibility. (Fassin 2009, p. 503)

Over the last two decades there has been a proliferation of partnerships between business and government, multilateral bodies, and/or social actors such as NGOs and local community organizations engaged in promoting development. (Mukherjee Reed and Reed 2009, p. 3)

In the partnership- and governance-related problem-settings, the voluntary mechanisms relying on multistakeholder, soft law regulation initiatives are often implicitly presented as the only regulation option in today's world. But there is of course a great deal of heterogeneity in the 65 governance-related problem-settings, and therefore we need to further characterize them according to the different ways they problematize governance. A deeper analysis shows that 10 of these problem-settings provide a quite neutral or balanced descriptive analysis of governance challenges and trends, while the others clearly emphasize certain ways of 'providing' governance: in the role of main 'provider' of governance, 1 problem-setting focuses on government, 1 focuses on industry, 7 focus on civil society, and the remaining 46 focus on cross-sector governance arrangements. Further analysis of these 46 problem-settings leads to interesting findings: while 19 of them do not include explicit description of the desirable relations between the 'partners'—10 articulating cross-sector governance arrangements as broadly creating value for society, 6 questioning the value for society provided by these arrangements, and 3 introducing the topic in a more balanced way—the other 27 include some indication of what the relations are or should be like. An overwhelming majority (24) privileges collaborative and 'deliberative' multistakeholder arrangements, making an implicit connection to contemporary concepts of democracy such as 'deliberative democracy' or 'dialogic democracy'—and sometimes explicitly drawing on authors who have developed these conceptualizations of democracy such as Habermas. Some examples from throughout the analysis period follow:

For maintaining global peace and stability, joint efforts by governments, MNEs, intergovernmental organizations, and NGOs are necessary. (Scherer and Smid 2000, p. 351)

These cross-sectoral, inter-organizational collaborations could also be considered a type of interorganizational "policy network", which attempts to balance autonomy and control among multiple institutional actors in pursuit of mutually desired objectives. (Starik and Heuer 2002, p. 222)

[…] a step towards the politicization of the corporation and attempt to re-embed the debate on corporate legitimacy into its broader context of political theory, while reflecting the recent turn from a liberal to a deliberative concept of democracy. (Palazzo and Scherer, 2006, p. 71)

[…] the creation of a dialogical understanding among affected stakeholders cannot be a mere outcome of applying certain accountability standards, but rather must be a necessary precondition for their use. This requires a stakeholder dialogue prior to making a choice…a discursive decision framework for accountability standards based on the Habermasian concept of communicative action […] (Rasche and Esser 2006, p. 251)

The success of GRI has been attributed to its founders' success as "institutional entrepreneurs" in shifting the field of governance…The founders promoted a vision of a multistakeholder process with broad and shared benefits. (Levy et al. 2010, p. 89)

Partnerships of various sorts, especially at the global level, have acquired rule and norm making authority, albeit of a relatively soft variety. Prominent examples include the Forest Stewardship Council, the UN Global Compact, and the Ethical Trade Initiative, but the range of partnerships enacting some form of societal governance is substantial. (Crane 2010, p. 17)

Only 3 problem-settings conceptualize these cross-sector governance arrangements as meant to be organized through more adversarial processes of bargaining and/or negotiation. Interestingly, 2 of these articles have the same author (Egels-Zandén 2009a, b) and relate to bargaining within transnational industrial relations.

The lack of enforcement of national labor laws and the limited protection of workers' rights in developing countries have led workers' rights representatives to attempt to establish transnational industrial relations systems to complement existing national systems. In practice, these attempts have mainly been operationalised in unilateral codes of conduct; recently, however, negotiated international framework agreements (IFAs) have been proposed as an alternative. (Egels-Zandén 2009a, p. 529)

In twentieth century Europe and the USA, industrial relations, labor, and workers' rights issues have been handled through collective bargaining and industrial agreements between firms and unions, with varying degrees of government intervention from country to country. This industrial relations landscape is currently undergoing fundamental change with the emergence of transnational industrial relations systems that complement existing national industrial relations systems. (Egels-Zandén 2009b, p. 169)

The latter 2 problem-settings suggest a struggle between the bargaining model and more voluntary modes of engaging as NGOs become key actors in the field of transnational industrial relations. It would seem that 'bargaining' as an organizing principle is considered an outmoded means for NGOs to take part in governance, as this type of adversarial means is explicitly mentioned in only one more governance-related problem-setting (Bled 2010), which focuses on the ways in which different actors seek to influence the 'negotiations' related to the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD).

This general bias towards more collaborative and deliberative ways of going about cross-sector governance involving business can be related to the influence of the recent works on 'Extended Corporate Citizenship' (Matten and Crane 2005) and 'political CSR' (Scherer and Palazzo 2007)—and it may also be true that empirically many of the adversarial NGOs choose to influence multistakeholder governance organizations from the outside rather than from the inside. But the seeming suppression of adversarial ways of relating within cross-sector partnerships and governance is also explicitly presented as a problem in 4 of the 6 critical problem-settings:

We hope to demonstrate that collaboration between organizations is not necessarily "good", conflict is not necessarily "bad". (Hardy and Phillips 1998, p. 217)

[…] post-partnerships suffer from the paradox of striving to marginalise those stakeholders whose support they need for establishing stable definitions of 'corporate responsibility'. (Egels-Zandén and Wahlqvist 2007, p. 175)

[…] while the CDP initiatives by SPDC, MPN and EPNL have the potential to contribute to community development, the failure to integrate negative injunction duties into existing partnerships means that the partnerships make no difference to how oil TNCs conduct their core business operation. (Idemudia 2009, p. 91)

More critical academic work has emphasized the limitations of PPPs in relation to possible co-optation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the state, and UN agencies […] (Lund-Thomsen 2009, p. 58)

In a similar way to these critical authors (although two of the above critiques are directed at empirical manifestations of cross-sector governance rather than at academic business discourse), we see the dominant tendency to suppress conflict in articulations of partnership and governance initiatives as problematic.

From NGO–Business Relationship to Blurred Boundaries

Until the most recent years, it was fairly easy to distinguish the roles of NGOs and businesses in the articles. As Austin (2010, p. 13) notes, there cannot be cross-sector collaboration without distinct actors from all sectors. In the articles, the tri-sector sequence was first mentioned by van Luijk (2000) as one of the future challenges for business ethics:

[…] the shifting relations between the market, governmental agencies and civil society require the elaboration of an institutional business ethics. (van Luijk 2000, p. 3)

Be their relationship adversary or collaborative, NGOs and businesses are dealt with as pursuing different goals, and civil society and business are considered different spheres of activity. The first traces of a suggested convergence of the roles can be traced to 2003:

> Organisations of all types are now reporting on their social, ethical and environmental impacts, although this development has been led by larger corporations with high public profiles and brands. It is now extending to the wider business community, and to public and private non-profit organizations. (Dando and Swift 2003, p. 195)

Later on, starting from the community participation articles of JBE in 2005, articulations of "community enterprise" emerge (Nwankwo et al. 2007).

> Community enterprises are distinguished from other third sector organisations by their generation of income through trading, rather than philanthropy and/or government subsidy, to finance their social goals. (Tracey et al. 2005, p. 327)

> Community enterprise – an increasingly common form of social enterprise, which pursues charitable objectives through business activities – may be the most effective mechanism for building local capacity in a sustainable and accountable way. (Nwankwo et al. 2007, p. 91)

That point onwards, articulations of converging roles increase. As is articulated in the ASQ special issue on social movements:

> There are already signs of convergence in the agendas of organization studies and the study of social movements. (Davis et al. 2008, p. 389)

In the most recent articles, it sometimes proves fairly challenging to differentiate between "business" and "NGO" activities. This holds especially for Fair Trade articles, posited as "the ethical alternative to neoliberal market practices" (Alvarado 2009, p. 301):

> The SSE [social and solidarity economy] can be seen as an economic activity whose purpose is to form a bond with disadvantaged groups of people. In this sense, fair trade can be viewed as an innovation by humanising the capitalist economy. (Özçağlar-Toulouse et al. 2009, p. 589)

> There has been a move in recent years within the fair trade movement away from its charity-supported background […] towards a more commercial position. (Davies and Crane 2003, p. 79)

The dividing line between an NGO and business is not always clearly defined. Instead the roles are presented as increasingly intertwined:

> The combined effect of these forces has made it increasingly manifest for firms and NGOs that they often populate the same "area of institutional life", that is, that they belong in a common organizational field. (Lucea 2010, p. 116)

> Fair trade innovators [are] a new type of entrepreneur […] these innovators aim to construct a 'new world' centered on trade relationships by integrating the role of multiple-player networks into the creation of value in the market. (Bezençon and Blili 2009, p. 589)

Fridell's (2009) article is also a good example of the discursive converging of business and NGO roles. It is hard to define which organization, activity, and ethos is clearly related to which sector. An argument both for and against can basically be made on the same grounds:

> Thus, the choice between Planet Bean and Starbucks is not just of two different routes to the same goal, but of contrasting goals that, ultimately, lead to incompatible visions of the future of fair trade: one that is stakeholder-driven and devoted to consumer education; and one that is shareholder driven and subsumed by corporate marketing strategies. (Fridell 2009, p. 82)

In the roles assigned to business leaders, the roles are also converging. Characteristics that have generally belonged to NGOs are assigned to business leaders, and in some articles similar responsibilities are assigned to NGOs and other social ventures as usually are assigned to companies:

> *In fact*, there is *widespread agreement* not only in societies, but also in the business world that multinational corporations and their leaders in particular have the means and thus the power to act as agents of world benefit… (Maak and Pless 2009, p. 537, own italics)

> Cosmopolitan business leaders are aware of the pressing problems in the world, care for the needs of others, and in particular for the distant needy, aspire to make this world a better place and act in word and deed as global and responsible citizens. (Maak and Pless 2009, p. 538)

> […] balancing nonprofit attitude to social service with business entrepreneurial orientation. […] (Vurro et al. 2010, p. 39)

As power gives responsibility, NGOs should be seen as having corporate stakeholder responsibility. (Fassin 2009, p. 503)

The stakeholders of NGOs expected them to operate their businesses in an ethical manner and behave as good corporate citizens when engaging in social venturing. (Easterly and Miesing 2009, p. 541)

Ultimately, the market and civil society spheres seem to merge into each other as social movements are claimed to create new markets and entrepreneurship becomes a guiding principle for civil society action:

This study illuminates how new markets emerge and how social movements can effect cultural change through market creation. (Weber et al. 2008, p. 529)

Our basic position is that economic, environmental, and social resources converge and take on the potential for yielding viable social entrepreneurial opportunities when accompanied by mobilization about a relevant social purpose or cause. (Murphy and Coombes 2009, p. 325)

Increased and active involvement of multinational corporations in the promotion of social welfare, in developing countries in particular, through the facilitation of partnerships and cooperation with public and nonprofit sectors, challenges the existing framework of our social and political institutions, the boundaries of nation- tates, the distinction between the private and public spheres of our lives, and thus our freedom. (Parkan 2009, p. 73)

Other prominent articulations include positive NGO–business relationship as instigators of change and increasing marketization:

Non-government organizations and corporations are increasingly engaging each other in recognition that shareholder and societal value are intrinsically linked. (Loza 2004, p. 297)

[…] how broad, large-scale social movements can facilitate the emergence of new sectors and organizational forms. (Sine and Lee 2009, p. 123)

Recently, scholars taking a closer look at the intersection of social movements and organizations have suggested that social movements can create new organizational boundaries through truces among competing factions in a field […]. (O'Mahony and Bechky 2008, p. 422)

We thus find that not-for-profit activity is converging with for-profit activity and vice versa, and that NGOs are attributed with traditionally business characteristics and vice versa. In addition to this, we find that partnership is in some cases focused on as an actor (e.g., Le Ber and Branzei 2010a, b; Kolk et al. 2010; Clarke and Fuller 2010). In the following, we turn to other discursive tensions and examine how they interact with the above.

Discursive Tensions: Voluntariness Under Pressure and the Co-Optation of NGOs

The most significant finding in terms of discursive tensions, i.e., articulations that we identified as inherently conflicting, oxymoronic, or otherwise logically contradictory, lies in the allegedly 'voluntary' nature of business involvement in partnerships with NGOs. It could be argued that in these articulations, the change in NGO–business relations from a pressure-response model is not to a partnership model but rather to an oxymoronic pressure-partnership model. Indeed, businesses are still portrayed as being under adversarial NGO pressure—only now, as a 'logical' outcome of this pressure, they are posited to voluntarily partner with NGOs:

Likewise, firms are experiencing heightened social, legal and global market pressures to operate more sustainably, and many are recognizing that cooperative environmental NGOs can be allies for launching credible environmental initiatives through green alliances […] (Stafford et al. 2000, p. 122).

Partnerships have become more common as corporations react to mounting pressure from corporate stakeholders, civil society and government on the responsible nature of their business practices. (LaFrance and Lehmann 2005, p. 161)

In this logic of adversarial relationships leading to ostensible win–win–win arrangements, the term 'pressure' is sometimes avoided and instead more constructive markers of NGO goals are privileged such as 'encouraging' or 'leading':

NGOs have played a vital role in encouraging multinational corporations (MNCs) to adhere to international standards. (Weidenbaum 2009, p. 147)

[…] a series of proposals emanating from [IGOs] and NGOs encouraging multinational corporations to pay more heed to human rights. (Campbell 2006, p. 256)

[…] activist pressure and increasing societal criticism […] have led multinationals to participate in […] voluntary standards to self-regulate their social conduct. (Arya and Salk 2006, p. 212)

In turn, it seems in some articulations that voluntariness by itself fully delivers accountability:

> Such initiatives allow organizations to improve their understanding of demands placed upon them by constituencies, since they offer self-reflective and communicative procedures holding firms accountable for what they do. Adherence to these standards is ensured either by the organization itself, its stakeholders or independent institutions (i.e., auditing bodies). (Gilbert and Rasche 2008, p. 765)

An (admittedly cynical) attentive reader could interpret this as though company x can voluntarily take on a voluntary initiative to a voluntary degree, voluntarily holds itself accountable through "self-reflection and communication" and voluntarily assures adherence by itself (unless it voluntarily chooses to rely on stakeholders or independent institutions for this).

In some more critical articulations, the voluntary nature of the involvement in partnership is downplayed, and instead the desirability of partnerships for companies is more explicitly tied to their self-interest:

> The combination of corporate-community conflicts and oil transnational corporations' (TNCs) rhetoric about being socially responsible has meant that the issue of community development and poverty reduction have recently moved from the periphery to the heart of strategic business thinking within the Nigerian oil industry. TNCs have increasingly responded to this challenge by adopting partnership strategies as a means to contribute to poverty reductions in their host communities as well as secure their social licence to operate. (Idemudia 2009, p. 91)

> The increasing concerns about social issues across business environments worldwide, and the resultant emphasis on the corporate social responsibility (CSR) idea (Carroll, 2004; Gabriel, 2006; Lindgreen et al., 2009; Perrini et al., 2006), have made crosssector social partnerships (CSSPs) or interactions increasingly desirable for organizations (Austin 2000; Kanter, 1998; Korten, 1998; Seitanidi and Lindgreen, 2008; Waddock and mith, 2000), especially those that need to burnish their CSR credentials (Seitanidi and Crane 2009; Seitanidi and Ryan, 2007). (Reast et al. 2010, p. 197)

This explicit link to company self-interest also implicitly means that the packaging of partnerships as voluntary (which probably originates in corporate communication but is uncritically reproduced in many academic articles) is a way for businesses to co-opt NGOs at least partly in order to neutralize their critique. The discursive co-optation of NGOs is also made possible by their representation as supporters of partnership:

> Partnership has been promoted by large numbers of corporations, governments, international agencies and non-governmental organisations as the most effective way of working towards the achievement of sustainable development. (Rein and Stott 2009, p. 92)

In this case, a footnote in the article specifies that the international agencies and NGOs referred to in this citation are the UK government-based Department for International Development, the UN Global Compact, the World Bank's Business Partners for Development, and the International Business Leaders' forum. The NGOs in this list are business organized NGOs (BONGOs), and referring to them as representatives of the entire NGO field can be seen as a way to co-opt NGOs in the allegedly quasi-universal celebration of 'partnerships'. Thus, business is represented as being 'called upon' to answer a demand from governments, intergovernmental organizations and NGOs. The demand for business participation in governance is posited as coming from all spheres of society. Sometimes it is unclear where the demand comes from but business is still presented as the solution to some societal concern:

> Each company needs to be part of the solution and needs to stretch its activities beyond normal market activities. This does not mean to turn the company upside down or into a charitable institution, but rather to identify the unique contribution the company may make as part of a broader effort to solve a major social challenge. (Maak and Pless 2009, p. 538)

Articulations in these citations can be seen as discursive interventions that make it possible for the business and society discourse to further incorporate societal and governance challenges as 'problems for which business is part of the solution' and thereby compete for dominance of the field of discursivity. These articulations completely disregard the existing tensions between the three spheres, representing partnerships and multistakeholder governance as the win–win–win solutions, thereby contributing to co-optation of critical voices.

The Role of Special Issues

As shown above, the narrative of moving 'from adversaries to partners' is one of the clearest trends among those that appear in the problem-settings throughout the analysis period. The contents of the special issues play a strong role in strengthening the partnership way of relating. As mentioned previously, our data includes six special issues on NGO–business relations with 49 articles. The first special

issue from 1999 is explicitly framed in terms of partnership, along the lines of the related Greening of Industry conference theme:

> […] the need for partnerships for sustainability – and its challenging implications – how to build constructive exchanges among diverse sectors of society […] sustainability [which] warrants alternative forms of leadership and contributions from industry, citizens, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and other environmental stakeholders. (Hartman et al. 1999, p. 255)

Interestingly, however, the three articles included in the special issue are not explicitly framed in terms of partnership, but rather in terms of governance mechanisms (Howard et al. 1999; Clarke and Roome 1999) and social pressure as an opportunity (Hastings 1999). As mentioned previously, these are articles that would not have been included based on our screening criteria, but were included based on the relevance of introduction. Indeed, the difference between the latest 2010 special issue in JBE over a decade later is significant: All articles are explicitly framed in terms of partnership, according to the theme "cross-sector social interactions", although one article includes a critical perspective on partnership (Cornelius and Wallace 2010). As the 1999 special issue, the 2010 issue is framed in terms of partnership:

> Interactions across sectors have intensified in recent years, particularly in the form of cross-sector social partnerships […] In all their different constellations, organizations from different economic sectors – public, nonprofit, and business – cooperate to address social issues by providing society with "public goods". (Seitanidi and Lindgreen 2010, p. 1)

In addition to the above special issues, the BAS special issue on the role of NGOs in the business–government–society interface and JBE special issue on business partnership for development are framed in terms of partnership. However, as the below introductory articles show, the tone of relating is not exclusively positive of partnership:

> Over the past several decades, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have grown in number, size, and stature and have become important actors influencing the conduct of business, including business–government interactions and the broader role of business in society. (Dahan et al. 2010, p. 20)

> The focus of this special issue is the recent growth in popularity of business partnerships in the developing world which are supposed to contribute to development […] While proponents of such partnerships are promoting them with great fervor, critics argue that

they tend to have minimal positive impact and could have a significantly negative impact insofar as they might be seen as relieving governments of their responsibilities to take a more active role in promoting development. (Lund-Thomsen and Reed 2009, p. 1)

These special issues also contain adversarial ways of relating, and as especially indicated in the latter, critical perspectives on partnership (e.g., Idemudia 2009). The BAS special issue, published in two separate parts, includes one pressure-response problem-setting (Skippari and Pajunen 2010) and one with different relations equally emphasized (van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2010). Thus, even though multiple ways of relating are included in the special issues, the partnership way of relating is the most dominant one. However, as shown in previous sections of this article, the blurring of roles is another dominant articulation within the problem-settings. This is true also for the JBE 2010 (e.g., Waddock 2010), but particularly for the ASQ special issue on social movements in organizations and markets, and JBE special issue on fair trade. What is most interesting, however, is that the introductory of the ASQ special issue is framed in terms of pressure-response:

> Social movements are pervasive in and around organizations, from policing the actions of multinationals to advancing demands for workplace rights to promoting and thwarting the development of new technologies to demanding that corporations fess up to negligence. (Davis et al. 2008, p. 389)

Therefore, the partnership agenda is not prevalent in all special issues. In addition to the introductory article, the problem-setting in King (2008a, b) also builds on a pressure-response way of relating. Therefore, as a conclusion we find that even though the articulations of partnership do not exclusively dominate the framing of the special issue articles, meaning that 4 problem-settings build on articulation of pressure-response and 5 contain a critical perspective, we find that while the majority of the problem-settings (29 articles) build on the partnership way of relating, our contention is that it seems 'accepted'—in the sense 'unquestioned'. We see it as our role in this article to open this narrative up for questioning.

Discussion and Implications

The overall purpose of this article was to critically examine the business and society discourse on NGO–business relations and in particular to (1) identify dominant articulations of NGO–business relations in business and society

discourse, (2) expose those articulations that are silenced or suppressed by these dominant articulations, and (3) critically assess possible power effects of these discursive dynamics in the field of discursivity To sum up, our main findings are: (1) that pressure-response articulations tend to be characterized by an instrumental, often managerial interest, thereby suppressing the notion that adversarial relationships should be promoted as good for society and/or democracy; (2) that articulations of dyadic NGO–business partnerships tend to suggest that there has been a shift from adversaries to partners, thereby silencing the possible value of adversarial relations whether within or without partnerships; (3) that governance-related articulations tend to privilege collaborative and deliberative ways of engaging for governance purposes rather than bargaining and negotiation between adversaries; and (4) that other discursive interventions contribute to suppressing adversarial subject positions from NGOs.

With the help of our methodology drawing on discourse theory, we can now reflect on: (1) how business and society discourse is competing for hegemony within the field of discursivity of NGO–business relations; and (2) how our findings are revealing of attempts to connect across disciplinary divides with other discourses, appropriating and rejecting articulations from them in order to construct hegemonic articulations, i.e., those potential articulations that would succeed in 'dominating the field of discursivity' by fixing the meanings and relations between elements. But also, our discourse theory approach can lead us to an explicit critique of what we find problematic in the currently dominant and suppressed articulations on NGO–business relations in business and society discourse, drawing on Mouffe's (1999, 2000, 2005) more recent works.

The fact that most pressure-response articulations tend to be characterized by an instrumental, often managerial interest leads them to not directly compete with other discourses for hegemony in the field of discursivity on NGO–business relations. Competing with social movements discourse and/or global governance discourse would necessitate an engagement with governance challenges from the viewpoint of the societal good, not just a concern with the business bottomline or NGO interests considered separately. That is why we do not see the majority of pressure-response articulations as directly competing with other discourses. One overall way in which business and society discourse is more directly competing for hegemony within the field of discursivity is through offering business a more decisive role in all issues typically addressed by or with NGOs. This is done through a number of discursive interventions. First, a 'taming' of NGOs is symbolically made through the articulation of a change in their role in the relationship, from adversaries to partners. Second, both

businesses and NGOs are encouraged to have more hybrid roles in relation to society (for business) and the market (for NGOs), which leads to the market and civil society spheres to seemingly merge into each other. Third, critical voices are often co-opted within the 'reasonable and balanced' business and society discourse—a feature that is in many ways to appreciate but that also contributes to suppressing conflict. Fourth, business is posited as a key 'part of the solution' for contemporary governance challenges in the alleged absence of governmental regulation possibilities. Fifth, a voluntary agency is claimed for business in its relations with NGOs, whose pressure is discursively transformed into encouragement as though it would represent a societal demand for business 'voluntarily' getting involved in win–win–win partnerships and multistakeholder governance arrangements. While these discursive interventions do not characterize all of the most dominant articulations of business and society discourse, to us they are more salient because, with their implicit aim for the societal better good, they directly enter in competition with articulations from social movements and governance discourses.

These interventions are arguably made more influential through organized attempts to fix business and society discourse. We have found special issues to contribute to this—particularly those that build on collaborative articulations. While these special issues are not full 'hegemonic interventions' in the sense that they do not fully lead to "the naturalisation of one single perspective" (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, p. 37) and are not uncritical nor unreflexive, they still contribute to a movement towards closure of business and society discourse in the sense that they implicitly suggest more collaborative ways of relating and increasingly focus on cross-sector governance, thus often marginalizing other (notably the more adversarial) ways of relating.

Interestingly, however, we also need to point out that evidence of increasing closure of the discourse is not traceable outside of these important special issues, notably because the trend towards a blurring of the roles of businesses and NGOs (also visible within some of the most recent pressure-response articles) would suggest a sort of opening of business and society discourse. Here, we can further reflect in terms of competition for hegemony within the field of discursivity. By blurring the roles of all institutional actors, the discourse also makes it possible for business actors to be increasingly posited as a legitimate 'part of the solution' to contemporary governance challenges. Hence, our interpretation is that business and society discourse interacts with social movements discourse and governance discourse in the following ways: it attempts to (1) co-opt social movements through partnership and collaborative articulations, (2) suppress those

accounts of social movements theory that are still focused on adversarial relationships, and (3) place business at the center of governance discourse notably through articulations that draw on 'deliberative democracy' and the 'post-political' perspective. As we have hinted in our analysis of governance-related articulations, this attempt to place business at the centre of governance discourse is very much in line with broader recent developments in business and society discourse, in relation to such new constructs as 'extended corporate citizenship' (Matten and Crane 2005) and 'political CSR' (Scherer and Palazzo 2007)—themselves influenced by developments in political theory, notably by the Habermasian notion of 'deliberative democracy'. Determining whether business and society discourse succeeds in dominating the field of discursivity is beyond the scope of this article, but it is clear that many contemporary policy recommendations (by 'independent' think tanks and increasingly governments) definitely see (1) business as a legitimate part of the solution to governance challenges and (2) partnerships between business, governments and civil society as the way forward relating to many of these challenges. Academic business and society discourse, in this sense, seems to be quite in line with—probably both influential on and influenced by—policy discourses. Let us now articulate our explicit critique of these trends.

The problem with the academic and policy focus on partnership and consensus along the lines of deliberative democracy can be articulated by drawing on Mouffe's (1999, 2000, 2005) more recent works (for related recent discussions see e.g., Burchell and Cook 2011). Contemporary dominant articulations of 'deliberative democracy' (Habermas), 'dialogic democracy' (Giddens) or 'subpolitical democracy' (Beck) tend to suppress conflict, dismissing adversarial models of the political field as outdated. As Mouffe (1999, p. 756) puts it, modern democracy instead should be seen as about "the recognition and legitimation of conflict and the refusal to suppress it". Deliberative democracy and reflexive democracy tend to erase "the adversarial dimension which is constitutive of the political and which provides democratic politics with its inherent dynamics" (Mouffe 2005, p. 29). What Mouffe (1999, 2000, 2005) proposes as an alternative is a model of 'agonistic pluralism' in which conflict between adversaries—i.e., legitimate enemies, "enem[ies] with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy" (Mouffe 1999, p. 755)—can be fully expressed so that the respective 'passions' are mobilized "towards the promotion of democratic designs" (Mouffe 1999, p. 756). Conversely, according to Mouffe (2000, p. 16), "too much emphasis on consensus and the refusal of confrontation lead to apathy and disaffection with political participation". Thus, too much emphasis on

partnerships, trisector governance and win–win–win rhetorics may be argued to lead to less democratic outcomes: "every consensus exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power and that always entails some form of exclusion" (Mouffe 1999, p. 756). The fact that the more adversarial NGOs are typically excluded from the partnership and trisector governance articulations of NGO–business relations—largely because they exclude themselves when wanting to remain adversaries in a world in which consensus is celebrated—leads us to three critical suggestions. First, more recognition of the value of adversarial relations should be included in partnership and governance articulations. Relegating these types of relations to the past is highly problematic as it implicitly dismisses legitimate disagreement as an outdated way to engage. Second, those articulations that focus on pressure-response could move beyond their instrumental arguments and contribute to the new conceptualizations of governance that at present tend to be completely dominated by win–win–win visions of cross-sector partnerships. Third, and in a sense 'between' the two previous suggestions, it would be important to promote NGO–business collaboration forms in which the win–win–win is not a predetermined conclusion, meaning that these modes of engagement may actually involve adversaries negotiating rather than partners working together for better (triple) bottomline outcomes. It is very likely that many NGOs who do engage in collaboration with business corporations still see themselves as adversaries, considering their collaboration as an arena for legitimate disagreement and negotiation. These types of subject positions for NGOs tend to be suppressed in the problem-settings of academic business and society discourse on NGO–business relations. They may be present in the conclusions of some articles but it would also be important that these conclusions be picked up in problem-settings, which would reveal a level of acceptance for more adversarial articulations of partnerships.

Finally, our methodological approach should be understood as a contribution in its own right. The focus on problem-settings makes it possible to analytically grasp dominant articulations in academic discourse. We argue that exposing dominant articulations is particularly useful in academic fields that are yet to be 'mainstreamed' in established academic discourse, where it is possible to capture discursive struggles and depict their implications. In addition, the discourse theory approach raises questions on the relationship between the contingent articulations and empirical reality. In terms of NGO–business relations, this raises the questions of how the win–win(–win) discourse and converging roles interplay with the adversarial and watchdog roles that NGOs have traditionally been associated with. Which invites questions such as: are watchdog

roles really less prominent among NGOs today? Have most NGOs happily embraced a status of 'hybrid' organizations with a business logic? Or would they rather define their own roles on their own terms? Even though these questions cannot be answered on the basis of this article, they remain important questions to be asked in a discursive environment that all too often suppresses rather than solves tensions in its haste to celebrate universal win–win–win–win–…s.

Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1

Category	Classification	Explanation	Example
NGO types	According to signifiers	Signifiers given to NGO organizations, or names of NGOs mentioned	"Greenpeace", "non-governmental organization"
NGO roles	Van Tulder and van der Zwart (2006) classification	GONGO, GINGO, BINGO, BONGO, DONGO, STRONGO, WONGO, SUNGO, DANGO,	"Greenpeace" (in article context): WONGO
NGO relationship with business	As articulated in text	As articulated in text	"Confrontation" (Dawkins 2005, p. 244)
NGO–business relationship model	Inductive category based on articulations	Pressure-response, soft law, fair trade, tri-sector, partnership, dialogue, philanthropy, not mentioned	"In this article, we seek to advance understanding of nongovernmental organization (NGO) strategies with regard to influencing corporations" (van Huijstee and Glasbergen 2010, p. 591) → pressure-response model
Context/trend	Author interpretation	Main context/trend of the article, as articulated in text	"[…] a framework for understanding the factors that contribute to MNC and community conflict […]" (Calvano 2008, p. 793)
Business/ company types	According to signifiers	Signifiers given to business/companies organizations, or names of business/companies mentioned	"Multinational Enterprise (MNE)", "Shell"
Business/ company roles in relationship	As articulated in text	As articulated in text	"firm managers interacting with these NGOs are fundamentally concerned with achieving social stability so that their organizations can operate undisturbed" (Lucea 2010, p. 116)
Other discursive interventions	As articulated in text	Articulations that are treated as discursive interventions	"social and solidarity economy (SSE)" (Özçağlar-Toulouse et al. 2009, p. 589)
Discursive tensions	As articulated in text	Articulation with inherent contradictions	Pressure versus voluntary: "[…] compel multinationals to adopt or even create voluntary codes of conduct" (Arya and Salk, 2006, p. 211). "[…] activist pressure and increasing societal criticism […] have led multinationals to participate in […] voluntary standards to self-regulate their social conduct" (Arya and Salk 2006, pp. 211–212)
"Old way"	As articulated in text	Contains characteristics of NGO–business relations in the past	"The once adversarial relationship between NGOs and companies…" (Kourula and Laasonen 2010, p. 36)
"New-way"	As articulate d in text	Contains characteristics of current/new NGO–business relations	"…has undergone a shift toward becoming more cooperative and more dialogic in form" (Kourula and Laasonen 2010, p. 36)
"More common"	As articulate d in text	Contains characteristics of more common features in NGO–business relations	"Transnational corporations are increasingly accused of aggravating, or at least not alleviating, pressing global problems" (Rasche et al. 2008, p. 151)
"Less common"	As articulate d in text	Contains characteristics of less common features in NGO–business relations	"Today, even NGOs who had been at the forefront of campaigns naming and shaming bad practices acknowledge banks are taking environmental risk management seriously" (Coulson 2009, p. 149)

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