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Global corporate responsibility in domestic context: Lateral decoupling and organizational responses to globalization

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Abstract

This paper examines how the domestic reception of global corporate responsibility is significantly shaped by institutionalized differences among state, business and civil society actors in the domestic context. In the global diffusion of ideas and practices, the decoupling of global policies and domestic practice is endemic, a process that this paper argues results from competing domestic interests and orientations. I examine this process of 'lateral decoupling' in a case study of the reception of the United Nations Global Compact among corporate responsibility practitioners in the city-state of Singapore. Differences in ceremonial, pragmatic and non-adversarial orientations towards global corporate responsibility generated significant uncertainty for businesses around how to apply corporate responsibility principles. In response, businesses constructed distinct narratives: large transnational and domestic companies emphasized values, community and tradition, while small businesses focused on the competitive advantages of corporate responsibility. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of domestic institutions for mediating global principles and local outcomes.

In the post-World War II era, global models that prescribe progressive change have had profound effects around the world (Meyer, 2010), reshaping domestic institutions in such domains as human rights (Cole, 2012), environmental protection (Frank *et al.*, 2000) and education (Schofer & Meyer, 2005). In recent years, this global movement has included the worldwide spread of corporate responsibility ideas and practices (Lim & Tsutsui, 2012). Yet, domestic actors face persistent constraints in implementing global policies (Campbell, 2004), often leading to ineffective or unintended results (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). Although domestic actors may either reject global policies (Aronowitz & Gautney, 2003; Smith & Johnston, 2002) or adapt global ideas to domestic contexts (Levitt & Merry, 2009; Zilber, 2006), fewer studies have explored a third and increasingly likely outcome: decoupling, where global policies are neither rejected nor adapted but adopted and sometimes implemented with little connection to concrete outcomes (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Meyer, 2000). Decoupling is a particularly significant theoretical issue for researchers interested in the intersection of the global and the local where domestic social change (Hironaka, 2014) and the efficacy of global policies (Smith, 2010) are seen as problematic rather than taken for granted.

This paper examines why decoupling occurs in global corporate responsibility in a study of state, business and civil society actors in the Republic of Singapore. In examining how global policies interface with domestic contexts, this paper employs the concept of decoupling in the world society perspective on globalization (Meyer *et al.*, 1997) and proposes an analytical framework that takes into account the institutionalized differences between domestic state, business and civil society actors. I illustrate this 'lateral decoupling' process with field research and interview data from state, business and civil society practitioners that engage with the United Nations Global Compact, one of the world's most popular corporate responsibility platforms (Rasche & Kell, 2010). Although corporate responsibility frameworks that encourage voluntary business attention to social and environmental issues have spread rapidly since the 1990s (Dashwood, 2012; Shanahan & Khagram, 2006), studies have also cast doubt on their domestic impact (Deva, 2006; Smith, 2010). This is a pertinent area of inquiry because it is not clear how global corporate responsibility ideas translate domestically, precisely the domain in which they purport to transform business practices. As such, this paper heeds the call of scholars (Dashwood, 2012; Hironaka, 2014) to complement cross-national quantitative analyses with case studies that unpack the processes and mechanisms that underlie the decoupling process. It contributes to research on corporate responsibility by providing a grounded account of how domestic state–market–civil society institutions may foster or impede the decoupling process.

Decoupling and global processes

Emerging from decades of political contestation (Sagafi-Nejad, 2008), global corporate responsibility frameworks have gained increasing prominence with state and non-state actors around the world (Fritsch, 2008; Lim & Tsutsui, 2012; Shanahan & Khagram, 2006; Utting, 2011). Frameworks such as the United Nations Global Compact consist of principles that businesses voluntarily adopt to address various social and environmental issues (Segerlund, 2010). Although global corporate responsibility frameworks were designed to tackle the problems of economic globalization (Kell, 2005; Ruggie, 2003), scholars quickly noticed their weak impact on domestic outcomes (Deva, 2006; Locke, 2013; Utting, 2002). In place of improving business practices, corporate responsibility reflected global power inequalities (Smith, 2010), neoliberal economic ideologies (Kinderman, 2012) and political compromises (Bartley, 2007). The emergence of global corporate responsibility and its mixed outcomes have not been due to domestic resistance or adaptation to local contexts: the rapid cross-national diffusion of global corporate responsibility frameworks suggests widespread endorsement and adoption among businesses worldwide (Tsutsui & Lim, 2015) but accompanied by much decoupling in the process (Lim & Tsutsui, 2012).

Why does decoupling occur and what are its domestic consequences? Drawing on neoinstitutional perspectives in organizational research (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), the world society perspective has identified decoupling as an endemic and increasingly prominent feature of globalization (Meyer, 2000; Meyer *et al.*, 1975, 1997). In contrast to rejection or adaptation, decoupling occurs where domestic actors demonstrate legitimacy by adopting global models of good citizenship but are often unwilling or unable effectively to implement those models (cf. Brunsson, 2002; Krasner, 1999). While the world society perspective has identified this important consequence of the spread of global policies, research from this approach has not explored the full implications of the decoupling process (cf. Cole, 2012; Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005; Hironaka, 2014). Why are domestic actors unwilling or unable to execute the global policies they adopt? What are the consequences for domestic actors after decoupling? Decoupling in world society is portrayed largely as being confined to the global policy and targeted domestic actor in question (Meyer, 2000). Yet, global policies and ideas also impact other domestic actors that, while not the direct target of those policies, may still influence their domestic reception.

Attention to decoupling in the domestic context provides an opportunity to address these questions by complementing the world society approach and highlighting the role of domestic institutions, primarily the interaction between the state, market and civil society (Abbott & Snidal, 2009; Somers, 2008; Wuthnow, 1991). My key argument is that the domains of state, market and civil society in the domestic context may have competing and contradictory orientations to global policies, in which case decoupling is more likely

to occur for domestic actors that are the targets of global policies. I refer to this process as 'lateral decoupling'.

Lateral decoupling

In the world society approach, the role of domestic institutions consists of local 'receptor sites' that 'receive, decode and transmit information from the outside … to local actors' (Frank *et al.*, 2000, p. 103; Frank *et al.*, 2009), particularly professional associations and international nongovernmental organizations that are carriers of global norms (Boli & Thomas, 1997). However, other domestic actors such as government agencies, corporations and civil society organizations can also serve as alternative, not to say competing, receptor sites for global principles. These domestic organizations may not be the direct target of global policies but nevertheless influence how decoupling occurs in domestic context (Fiss & Zajac, 2004). In the context of corporate responsibility, for example, businesses are the actors that adopt and implement global models, but their decisions are also impacted by prominent actors like government agencies and civil society organizations (Delmas & Terlaak, 2002; Hoffman, 2001).

Since global policies may impact domestic practices through multiple channels, rather than only through professional associations (cf. Meyer, 2008, pp. 803–804), 'lateral decoupling', or the degree to which domestic institutions differ in their orientations, may have significant impact on whether global models are effectively transplanted to domestic contexts. For example, domestic actors may be oriented towards the same broad goals but still differ markedly on their approaches to those goals. It is, in fact, likely that domestic institutions will work at odds with one another given that local actors may have different and competing interests, as in discussions of domestic political economy in varieties of capitalism perspectives (Hall & Soskice, 2001) and other institutional approaches (Jepperson, 2002).

Domestic responses to lateral decoupling

The world society approach to globalization also stops short of explaining the consequences of decoupling in the domestic context. Once domestic actors have adopted global models but have not connected those models to outcomes, does the decoupling process end there? After all, inconsistencies resulting from decoupling can act as triggers for further conflict, mobilization and change (Meyer, 2000, p. 244, 2009, p. 56; Meyer *et al.*, 1997, p. 168). For example, governments that supported human rights only ceremonially have faced subsequent pressure from international nongovernmental organizations to further address human rights concerns (Hafner-Burton & Tsutsui, 2005). In a similar fashion, I argue that lateral decoupling generates substantial environmental uncertainty (cf. Rasche, 2012, p. 685) because domestic actors disagree about how best to receive and implement global policies. Domestic actors are thus

constantly faced with the problem of how to reconcile existing and future practices with models they have adopted. This problem is one of 'how explicitly participants define appropriate action' (Rasche, 2012, p. 701) when standards for implementation are uncertain but pressure for conformity is high.

I propose that domestic actors respond to lateral decoupling by producing new organizational narratives (Czarniawska, 1997) and ideologies (Brunsson, 2002) to circumvent the loose coupling between global policies and domestic outcomes. Thus, decoupling is not merely a static outcome but a process that further shapes domestic actors' orientations to global policies. For instance, common narratives in global corporate responsibility such as 'corporate responsibility as tradition' or the 'business case for corporate responsibility' (cf. Vogel, 2005) may not only be expressions of intrinsic corporate motivations, but as responses to environmental uncertainty and conformity pressures. Figure 1 diagrams and summarizes these processes.

Global corporate responsibility in Singapore

To illustrate the lateral decoupling process and its domestic consequences, I present an analysis of the reception of global corporate responsibility that

Domestic Institutions

Government
Orientation: Ceremonial
To create a critical mass
of participants

Civil Society
Orientation: Consensus
To continue receiving support
from corporations

LATERAL
DECOUPLING

Corporations
Orientation: Pragmatic
To balance cost and resource
constraints with corporate
responsibility

ORGANIZATIONAL
RESPONSES

VALUES, TRADITION
AND COMMUNITY
Narrative: Corporate
responsibility as coherent
with organizational values,
tradition, and ties to
the community
e.g., transnational and
large domestic corporations

COMPETITIVE
ADVANTAGE
Narrative: Corporate
responsibility as market
differentiator and
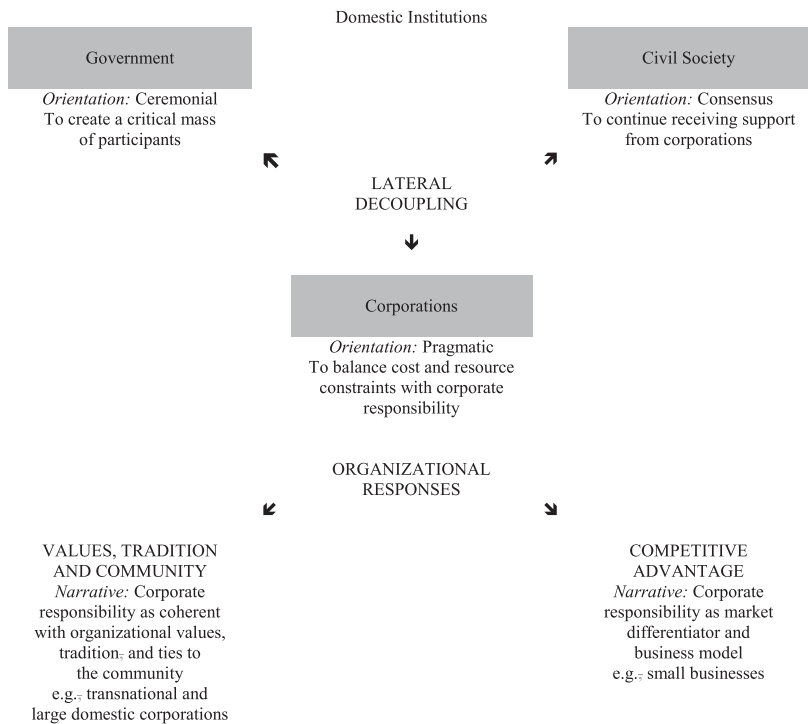business model
e.g., small businesses

Figure 1. Domestic institutions, lateral decoupling and organizational responses

compares corporations, government actors and nongovernmental organizations in the Republic of Singapore. An appropriate case study of decoupling and the domestic impact of global corporate responsibility frameworks should feature a domestic context with a high degree of global connectedness and a wide range of types of business organizations. According to several indexes, Singapore is the one of the 'most global' countries in the world (see for example Foreign Policy, 2003-2007), with high degrees of foreign economic penetration and transnational corporate presence (Blomqvist, 2005; Koh *et al.*, 2002; Peebles & Wilson, 2002; Phelps, 2007). State and non-state actors in Singapore have also come under increasing pressure to adopt global corporate responsibility principles in line with other developed economies (Tan, 2011; Wong, 2009). Singapore offers a comprehensive range of transnational corporations, regional companies, domestic firms and small businesses, making it an ideal domestic context for comparing organizational responses to global pressures across different types of corporations.

Although several theoretical and macro-level studies have investigated business motives for participating in global corporate responsibility frameworks (e.g. Bennie *et al.*, 2007; Campbell, 2007; Drezner & Lu, 2009; Fritsch, 2008; Haufler, 2001; Jiang & Bansal, 2003; Lim & Tsutsui, 2012; Perez-Batres *et al.*, 2011), fewer studies have directly surveyed or interviewed corporate responsibility practitioners (Cetindamar & Husoy, 2007; McKinsey & Company, 2004; UN Global Compact Office, 2011; Welch *et al.*, 2002). This lack of more direct inquiry into business responses to global frameworks makes it difficult to adjudicate the contextual and domestic factors that shape how corporations understand what are appropriate orientations to global principles and how they act on external pressures for changes to their responsibility practices (Miura & Kurusu, 2015). Field research and interviews with corporate responsibility practitioners can document 'how actors collectively interpret rules and translate them into action' (Rasche, 2012, p. 701) and reveal the underlying processes and mechanisms of decoupling in domestic context (Hironaka, 2014).

I conducted fieldwork and interviews with corporate responsibility practitioners in various corporations, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations. I define corporate responsibility practitioners as those individuals in organizations whose delegated responsibility, political and economic interests or personal motivation is to promote and implement corporate social responsibility in business corporations. I contacted potential interview respondents in all corporations in Singapore that were participants in the UN Global Compact. Of those corporations, 22 agreed to be interviewed, and I administered interviews with their representatives. During this period, I also conducted interviews with representatives of two corporations that indicated interest in engaging with but were not members of the Global Compact. In total, I conducted 31 formal structured interviews, most lasting approximately one hour, with an appropriate amount of time outside of structured questions for respondents to elaborate on their answers and

Table 1. List of interview respondents

Interview	Organization
Government	
G1	Prime Minister's Office
G2	Singapore Compact
G3	Singapore Compact
G4	Ministry of Manpower
Transnational Corporations	
T1	Financial services (1)
T2	Financial services (2)
T3	Textiles
T4	Solar energy
T5	Petroleum (1)
T6	Electronics and semiconductors
T7	Building materials and aggregates
Regional/Domestic Corporations	
D1	Financial services (3)
D2	Agribusiness
D3	Property and real estate (1)
D4	Natural gas and crude oil
D5	Water and environmental solutions
D6	Food and beverage retail
D7	Financial services (4)
D8	Petroleum (2)
D9	General insurance
D10	Financial services (5)
D11	Investment holding and stock exchange
Small Businesses	
S1	Paper products
S2	Food and beverage
S3	Information technology development
S4	Property and real estate (2)
S5	Marine electronics
S6	Pest control
S7	Financial services (6)
Civil Society/Nongovernmental Organizations	
C1	Corporate social responsibility
C2	Employment services

explain their corporate responsibility strategies and practices. Table 1 lists my interview respondents. I reference interviews in parentheses with a letter–number scheme. Letters denote the type of organization interviewed (T: transnational corporation; D: regional/domestic corporations; S: small businesses; C: civil society/nongovernmental organizations).

Lateral decoupling and global corporate responsibility

Government actors as receptor sites: promoting the legitimacy of corporate responsibility

As participants in global forums, government actors are often important conduits for global norms. Early in its development in 1961, the newly established Singapore government consulted with international organizations and economic experts to implement industrialization and economic development policies for its fledgling economy (United Nations, 1963). For the most part of its history, the Singapore state's political hegemony (Chua, 1995) and tripartite (state–business–labour) governance structure (Tan, 1999) allowed government actors great latitude in transposing global models domestically. Government actors were the first to introduce the UN Global Compact to corporations in Singapore (Tan, 2011, p. 34). A prominent politician and cabinet minister learnt of the framework while participating in discussions in global forums and alerted various state agencies to the possibility of integrating global corporate responsibility concerns into government policies (G1):

> It was my responsibility to keep abreast of international developments and one of the things that caught my eye was corporate social responsibility. … I had also been very uncomfortable with the swing in economic thinking – that the company's sole motive is to maximize profit for shareholders. I had always believed that a company exists for the benefit of society, and everyone should share in the success of the company. … Then, we came to know about UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's promotion of the UN Global Compact. The officers of the Singapore Compact then promoted the UN Global Compact to companies operating in Singapore. (G1)

These efforts resulted in establishing the Singapore Compact for Corporate Social Responsibility in 2005, a domestic 'focal point' or local network that was a direct conduit between the UN's Global Compact Office and corporations in Singapore (G3). Global Compact Local Networks are domestic organizations that promote the Global Compact and facilitate corporate responsibility efforts by conducting workshops, seminars and consulting services (UN Global Compact Office, 2007).

As a receptor site, government actors were inclined to view the Global Compact framework from a symbolic and ceremonial perspective rather than as a practical means to address corporate responsibility problems. According to respondents, Singapore's stringent regulatory environment, low level of corruption and tripartite governance policies (Tan, 1999) obviated any explicit need for global standards. The Singapore Exchange, a holding company that oversees securities trading, for example, was slower to require social and environmental disclosures from its listed companies because existing risk management criteria already far exceeded global corporate responsibility standards

(D11). Other corporate respondents also reiterated Singapore's stringent regulatory practices and transparency of public administration (T7). According to a Singapore Compact representative (G3), 'It is a regulated economy, you don't see so much bribery and corruption here in Singapore. We don't have child labor here. Environment-wise, as well, I think it's not too bad'.

Government support for the Global Compact focused less on directly regulating corporations' social and environmental practices and more on establishing the legitimacy of global corporate responsibility through ceremonial and symbolic activities. One key concern was to increase the perceived legitimacy of the Global Compact by creating a critical mass of corporate participants. When it was founded in 2005, the Singapore Compact contacted prominent corporations that operated in Singapore, 'reaching out to [corporations] who were already more forward looking, to create a momentum' (G1). Key to this ceremonial orientation were symbolic efforts such as promoting annual awards ceremonies to recognize corporations for their practices (G2) and publishing case studies of corporations that successfully integrated corporate responsibility into their business practices (Wong, 2009). These efforts to increase Global Compact membership also entailed convincing corporations that their existing practices already aligned with global principles rather than efforts to introduce 'new' practices (G2, G3).

These symbolic efforts were moderately successful in raising awareness among corporations in Singapore (Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2008). Corporations that were Global Compact members first became involved by participating in Singapore Compact workshops (D5, S5), learning about international labour and environmental standards. Despite the Singapore Compact's efforts, however, small businesses felt those symbolic efforts targeted only transnational and large domestic corporations. Because government actors focused primarily on expanding the membership base of the Global Compact in Singapore, they appealed directly to larger and more established corporations that had the resources and practices that already aligned with Global Compact principles. Small businesses, on the other hand, wanted to explore corporate responsibility strategies through the Global Compact but felt the framework catered ceremonially to larger corporations that already had more substantial experience with corporate responsibility (S3, S4, G3).

Corporations as receptor sites: a pragmatic approach to corporate responsibility

Corporations also serve as receptor sites for global norms, separate from governmental channels. Subsidiaries of transnational corporations, for example, may import corporate responsibility standards from their parent companies, shaping domestic standards of how corporations should relate to their stakeholders (T1). Otherwise, corporations may be socialized into responsibility expectations through peer organizations or through their own engagement in

global forums (Dashwood, 2012). Large domestic companies with long-standing ties to local communities and extensive philanthropic activities can also serve as receptor sites by connecting existing practices to global norms and socializing other domestic companies (D2). Even small businesses, that have fewer resources to engage with corporate responsibility to begin with, can be enterprising about connecting their existing corporate philosophies to global norms (S4).

Although state practitioners like the Singapore Compact were moderately successful in creating awareness among its network of corporate members, corporations' pragmatic concerns, whether due to practical implementation, resource constraints or increased spotlighting of their activities, contrasted directly with government actors' more symbolic approach to promoting global corporate responsibility in Singapore. The transnational and large domestic corporations I interviewed had existing corporate responsibility policies that fit within the broad parameters of Global Compact principles, but other companies, especially small businesses, were less certain that global principles could be effectively implemented. These corporations were aware that corporate responsibility issues were salient for their businesses but were more concerned with practical applications than with public relations. Respondents I interviewed were cognizant that corporate responsibility brought reputational gains but also expressed difficulties with balancing corporate responsibility with operational costs (D4, D8) and internal middle management resistance (D10). For example, a representative from a domestic petroleum company wondered if resources spent on integrating corporate responsibility into its operations were better spent on charitable donations (D8):

> We are sometimes afraid to do a bit more corporate responsibility because the management keeps thinking it costs a lot of money. ... So, we think we don't really have a choice but to do all these studies which cost money and sometimes it's hard to justify. I mean, why spend the $8,000 on a study when we can just donate that $8,000 to charity? So, sometimes when they mention corporate responsibility, they get very worried like it is going to cost a lot of money. (D8)

A representative from a regional bank emphasized that, while senior managers were often enthusiastic about corporate responsibility, middle managers tasked with its actual implementation were more cautious (D10):

> Actually, I think senior management could see quite clearly why but it was more middle management. ... The top management knows the strategic reasons why we should do it but I guess the middle management are the ones who are responsible for [the profit and loss statements]. They also question why resources are being channeled to this or is it going to take up our staff's time. (D10)

Resource constraints were most acute for smaller companies that wanted to institutionalize corporate responsibility policies that were directly related to

their specific business operations (S3, S5, S6). A marine electronics company representative, for example, explicitly compared his small business to the 'huge multinationals' (S5):

> We don't have the big bucks like the huge banks, all these huge multinationals that operate in Singapore, to do elaborate advertising, print pamphlets, glossy pamphlets to show what they are doing. But we do still try and we try to do it in small ways. But, you know, one of the common challenges today, as they say, is really cost. (S5)

A representative from a technology solutions company remarked that corporate responsibility seemed more like 'bureaucracy and a lot of documentation' and questioned if their resources could be better channelled elsewhere (S3). The general manager of a local pest control company also mentioned that small businesses were directly responsible for all aspects of their corporate responsibility practices and did not have the resources to engage external consultants for advice (S6). Even larger corporations recognized that cost constraints made it difficult for smaller companies to effectively implement corporate responsibility policies (T1).

Aside from resource constraints, respondents also voiced concerns that engaging with corporate responsibility would raise their public profile and invite more scrutiny into their operations. This view contrasts most directly with critics that perceive corporate responsibility as a public relations tool, since these businesses were cautious that publicly endorsing the Global Compact would have negative repercussions in light of unpredictable future events. The representative from the domestic petroleum company, for example, was wary that her corporation's endorsement of global corporate responsibility would invite accusations of 'greenwashing', especially when it was difficult to foresee operational mishaps or changing external expectations (D8):

> We can go and sign any of these compacts or whatever but we don't want to be audited. We are not sure which organizations we want to commit to or even which things to commit to. Then, we will be audited and I don't think we want that or we are ready for that. (D8)

Nongovernmental organizations as receptor sites: non-adversarial civil regulation

At the domestic level, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) play an important role in facilitating global norms and scrutinizing domestic actors' practices. Referring to nongovernmental pressure as a form of 'civil regulation', Vogel (2005) argued,

> Not only is [corporate responsibility] not a substitute for effective government, but the effectiveness of much civil regulation depends on a strong and well-

functioning public sphere. This is particularly true when it comes to corporate commitments to avoid corruption and respect human rights. (Vogel, 2005, p. 170)

Singapore does not have an adversarial civil sphere (Koh & Ooi, 2004; Lee, 2002). Although civil associations and nongovernmental organizations have operated in Singapore since its independence, the majority of civil, associational and grassroots organizations were heavily regulated and their equivalent functions subsumed under parapolitical institutions (Rodan, 2005). Ethnic associations, voluntary welfare organizations and charitable organizations that fall outside of the state's purview tend to be the recipients of corporate and government aid rather than corporate watchdogs or critics (C2). Besides the Singapore Compact, which is directly connected to government actors, the only significant nongovernmental organization dedicated to corporate responsibility is CSR Asia, a Hong Kong-based 'social enterprise' that focuses on monitoring corporations' practices, specifically social and environmental disclosure, in relation to standards in other countries (C1). This nongovernmental organization also offers consulting services for companies interested in benchmarking, disclosure and reporting.

Compared to the state and corporations, there are fewer civil society and nongovernmental organizations in Singapore that serve as receptor sites for global corporate responsibility frameworks. Aside from the Singapore Compact, for example, there were only five NGOs in Singapore that were participants in the UN Global Compact in 2011, and it is not immediately clear how many of these organizations perform the type of sustained advocacy work that is common with NGOs in the United States or Europe. Given the tripartite governance platform for state–business–labour relationships in Singapore, corporations in Singapore did not identify NGOs or the domestic civil sphere as potential sources of adversarial pressure (D8, S3). A representative from a prominent property company said (D3):

> In Singapore, our culture, we work in a very collaborative, polite, very consultative kind of environment, and that's why you see there's harmony between companies and NGOs and the government and all that. Where in other countries, maybe there's greater friction because there is greater voice, there are greater rights issues … that causes friction. And here in Singapore there tends to be a consultative environment. That would be what you can term 'stakeholder engagement.' But perhaps that stakeholder engagement would not be the same kind of stakeholder engagement as would be defined in, say, a European country, where stakeholder engagement means constantly addressing lobby groups. … But that doesn't happen here simply because we are just not as vocal. And the culture has been such that it tends to be consultative. (D3)

This was reiterated by the Singapore Compact representative (G3):

> You don't have Greenpeace, you don't have Amnesty International. What you
> see is something like [the World Wildlife Fund]. … Where with Greenpeace,
> they previously hammered Golden Agri in the palm oil industry. … In Singa-
> pore, you don't have such strong bottom up pressure so you don't see
> perhaps fast movement or impetus towards a company's practice [on corporate
> responsibility]. (G3)

In fact, corporate respondents remarked that NGOs in Singapore were not only
not antagonistic but, instead, were the recipients and beneficiaries of corporate
donations (S4, D1, T1) – NGOs would routinely seek funds from corporations
to support social and charitable events. The managing director of a paper pro-
ducts company, for example, remarked, 'We support the NGOs, in fact, not the
other way round' (S1). Although the lack of independent corporate watchdogs
has not resulted in a dearth of corporate responsibility practices (G3, C1), this
consensual, non-adversarial relationship diverges from government actors'
legitimacy approach or corporations' pragmatic orientation to global corporate
responsibility.

   Nongovernmental practitioners, when they are domestically active, can
potentially bridge the state's legitimacy approach and corporations' more prag-
matic interests. NGOs may, for example, work in tandem with corporations to
identify specific problems to be addressed while providing strategies and tem-
plates of action that align with global corporate responsibility principles. A CSR
Asia representative offered the following as an example (C1):

> The Global Compact is really just a matter of signing up for those principles so
> it's an accessible way to come into [corporate responsibility]. It's great and it's an
> inspiration to other companies. But when you sign up to the Global Compact,
> you are in fact signing up to a charter that supports all kinds of industry that
> may be drastically different in how you actually do your [corporate responsibil-
> ity]. But [other global disclosure frameworks are] kind of the next step so you can
> start reporting on what you're doing and it goes back to implementing practical
> solutions. So, you start doing some stakeholder engagement and working intern-
> ally to define the issues that are going to apply to [corporate responsibility]. (C1)

Decoupling and organizational responses

Lateral decoupling and organizational uncertainty

Lateral decoupling generated significant uncertainty for corporations where
there were competing orientations to corporate responsibility among domestic
actors (C1). My interviews indicated that these competing notions led to con-
fusion about what activities qualified as corporate responsibility or which indi-
viduals and departments were responsible for corporate responsibility practices
(D6, S5). Corporations were also wary of the uncertainty surrounding the

applicability of standards across national contexts and whether those standards were fairly applied in different countries. A director of planning and supply management in an international electronic and semiconductors corporation remarked (T6):

> I think it's unfair for developed countries to penalize the developing countries or underdeveloped countries. It's unfair. You've already destroyed the world, then now you ask, 'Hey, guys, let's behave.' You know, I'm not sure sometimes. We can do this thing on paper that appears to be right but I say, 'Is it fair? Are you doing the same measurements?' … In Europe, they ban a substance and then they move it to me. Then, they say one year later, 'Hey, you are not complying'. I say, 'What? I didn't know! I've just finished the product transfer but now I am the scapegoat for non-compliance?' (T6)

Small businesses were especially vocal about uncertainties around cost and the lack of standardized expectations. For example, the CEO of the real estate company said (S4):

> In a perfect world, I would have sorted it all out. In the real world, I am struggling with this. … Of course, the question you people are interested in, whether doing all this [corporate responsibility] will help me earn more money, improve my business, and add to my bottom line, the reality is: I don't see that. I can try to convince myself that maybe we do but, really, there is no direct correlation at this point in time. (S4)

A representative from a small information technology solutions company also remarked (S3):

> At the end of the day, I think that there are just too many issues, especially the gap between larger companies and [small businesses]. The framework may not apply to the standards and requirements [of small businesses]. It may ultimately be only for the big companies. So, definitely, that would be an issue and you would probably only see the top 10 per cent of companies in the world doing [corporate responsibility]. The rest of the 90 per cent may not be because the framework does not cater for [small businesses]. (S3)

Nevertheless, my interviews indicated that these uncertainties stemming from the external environment pushed corporations to engage in concerted efforts cognitively to reassess their existing orientations in light of their commitment to the UN Global Compact. Corporations in Singapore were cognizant of, and perhaps overly cautious with, the consequences of not complying with their explicit commitments, even if current standards were vague and uncertain (D7). As a result, my interviews revealed that corporations responded to lateral decoupling by generating their own logics of appropriateness, emphasizing either values, community and tradition or organizational competitiveness, as narratives that aligned

their organizational identities and existing practices with their corporate responsibility commitments. I noted that these narratives did not have to be effective: corporations may not actually reduce the uncertainty associated with lateral decoupling, only that these narratives portray how global corporate responsibility best 'fits' their organizational needs, practices and identities.

Values, community and tradition

The first response to uncertainty generated by lateral decoupling was by justifying corporate responsibility as integral to businesses' organizational values and focus on community and tradition. Transnational corporations and large regional and domestic companies were more likely to cite organizational values as a corporate responsibility narrative that was relevant to their organizations. In these cases, corporations perceived corporate responsibility as core to their business strategy or simply a central part of their organizational culture. Responding to questions on obstacles to reconciling corporate responsibility with internal operational practices, these respondents emphasized that corporate responsibility was consistent with their core organizational identity, often invoking terms like 'organizational values'. A project manager at an international building materials company prepared an 'organizational values' chart for the interview, telling me (T7), 'We are actually aiming for this. We are not only making profits – we actually believe in values'. Replying to a question about joining the Global Compact, a director from a German-based solar energy company said (T4):

> I think it was not difficult for management to sign up for the principles of the Global Compact because this large step is part of the company's DNA. Be it because we are a German company, where we like to be a high performer, we are very efficient in our processes, and the company deals with employees fairly. (T4)

When I asked a representative from a prominent regional property company about obstacles to implementing the Global Compact, she replied (D3):

> No. I think because, as I've said, it's quite ingrained in the organizational culture. I think we've come so far in this journey where we actually end up having to ask what's next and because we need to keep progressing as an organization. We have to look at what are the best practices out there that we can either adopt or implement with the view to improve. So, some of the [corporate responsibility] frameworks and methodologies are quite aligned with our corporate vision and I suppose that they gain traction globally. (D3)

This view was echoed by a representative from a large regional bank (D1), who said, 'When we look at it, I think good business practice is beyond the letter of

the law. And that's why it's important that we inculcate that and build that into the DNA of the organization'.

Companies I interviewed also emphasized another aspect of the organizational values narrative that centred on community and tradition, typically linking corporate responsibility with the tradition of their founders, top executives' moral orientations or to long-standing ties with the community. Domestic corporations, especially large Singapore companies with long-standing ties in the country and region, were more likely to invoke community and tradition as a means of connecting to the broad global principles they adopted. Although respondents from these companies also discussed pragmatic motivations, they routinely coupled those reasons with narratives of business engagement in the local community.

Large domestic companies in Singapore have a long-standing tradition of donating to charitable causes, supporting voluntary welfare organizations and organizing and sponsoring community events (Saw, 2008). Furthermore, some of these corporations were founded as family-run organizations with deep roots in pre-war Singapore's Chinese community where their founders were often community leaders and philanthropists (D7). For example, a respondent from a prominent domestic banking company said (D1):

> If you look back at our founders … they have always been philanthropists in this part of the world: Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, China. So, people see that it's believable that [our company] has always been helping businesses, helping individuals. (D1)

Similarly, a senior manager at a regional real estate developer cited the company's forefathers as influential in setting the tradition for corporate responsibility, which she connected to their current practices (D3):

> You know, traditionally, we are a Singapore-based company. I suppose our forefathers, they tend to have a very traditional view of giving back to the community. That was right from the beginning with our founder. So, during the early days of Singapore, I think you'll find some of these early forefathers doing their part for the community and a lot of that tends to be very philanthropy-driven. But I think over the years things have evolved to beyond just donations and philanthropy. Maybe in the last decade or so, when the new generation took over, I think there was this realization by our top management that [we] could do more in the area of community than just philanthropy. (D3)

Regional companies with a long-standing pre-war presence in the country also used community and tradition narratives to frame their corporate responsibility. A manager at one of the region's oldest food and beverage retailers said (D6):

> We have been around here close to 107 years so we are very much part of the community as we are part of nation-building. Since 1903, I think. As a result

of that and being such an old institution, an established institution in Singapore, we thought there's a lot we could actually do in terms of, not just simply being a commercial entity in Singapore, but more to the effect of being a caring institution. I think we ought to show ourselves in this respect. But this is more than something that has just started because, over the years, we have been involved in activities that relate in part to [corporate responsibility]. (D6)

In light of uncertainty surrounding global corporate responsibility and the pressure to conform, corporations responded with narratives of corporate responsibility that aligned most closely with aspects of their organizational identity. Transnational corporations and large regional and domestic companies already had existing corporate responsibility policies and personnel, making compliance with global principles less onerous than for small businesses. As such, these larger and more prominent corporations focused on framing global models in light of their tradition, organizational values, and long-standing ties to community.

Competitive advantage

Another prominent business response to environmental uncertainty was competitive advantage – the perception that corporate responsibility conferred competitiveness or efficiency – as a means to justify their commitment to global principles (Saeed & Arshad, 2012). Although the companies I interviewed also associated personal values, community relations and external pressures with corporate responsibility, they nevertheless emphasized that corporate responsibility was a means of 'adding value' to their products. Respondents in this category perceived their customers as discerning consumers that sought products and services that were produced responsibly. Responding to questions about the challenges of incorporating Global Compact principles, small businesses were more likely to invoke competitive advantage when responding to uncertainty, given that smaller companies faced more cost and resource constraints and did not have the financial latitude to implement comprehensive corporate responsibility policies. For example, the general manager of a pest control company remarked (S6):

The pest control market is very competitive, there are more than 200 companies currently in Singapore. So, if you want to stand out, you really need either to have superb service or have some differentiator, and environmental concern was one thing we used for differentiating. (S6)

Companies invoking competitive advantage also emphasized that corporate responsibility added 'value' to their products and services, rather than constraining their practices. According to the CEO of a small real estate company (S4):

> I know that [corporate responsibility] is part of my business model. It means if you buy my shares, you buy my service in my current business model. … It's not something where I suddenly decide to do something or cut money on doing it. When you buy a share in my company, you believe in my business model, you also believe in what I'm doing. (S4)

The managing director of the paper products firm also emphasized (S1):

> I would really like to say this: [corporate responsibility] is an investment and not really so much of a cost. Just like [the Forest Stewardship Council] itself is a huge industry – it's about US$20 billion around the world. It's not so big yet in Singapore but has been growing up. … As a sort of future investment, we look at new divisions or products overseas and staff training and all that. (S1)

Notably, small businesses were more likely than larger transnational or regional companies to use competitive advantage narratives despite no immediate or tangible evidence that corporate responsibility improved their business (S3). A Singapore Compact executive reiterated that small businesses creatively integrated competitive advantage narratives, saying, 'Scale-wise, they are more or less smaller but it is amazing the way they put [corporate responsibility] into their business strategy and try to differentiate themselves in the market' (G3).

In sum, smaller companies remarked that they had less financial and organizational latitude to comprehensively address global principles (S3, S4, S5, S6), and they attributed environmental uncertainty surrounding corporate responsibility as a challenge that impacted them more severely than larger companies that had the resources and existing practices to address corporate responsibility concerns. While these smaller companies were already committed to corporate responsibility, the environmental uncertainty they faced resulted in efforts to shape their orientation to corporate responsibility according to competitive advantage narratives that could justify the adoption of a global policy that did not have immediate, tangible benefits.

Discussion

In this paper, I have demonstrated how analysing the domestic impact of global corporate responsibility frameworks can reveal the role of domestic institutions in the decoupling of global principles and local outcomes. Through field research and interviews with a range of organizations engaged with the UN Global Compact, I highlighted how domestic organizations responded with differing orientations to corporate responsibility, creating much uncertainty about the utility and applicability of global principles. The findings of this paper make two key contributions to studies of the global corporate responsibility movement's domestic consequences.

First, the extent to which domestic organizations and institutions cohere in their reception of global principles is problematic at best. Attention to this

process of lateral decoupling contextualizes globalization's effects by identifying differences between domestic institutions' orientations to global policies. In the Singapore case, although state, non-state and corporate actors were all receptive towards a specific global framework – the UN Global Compact – their orientations to the principles of that framework were markedly different, resulting in contradictory results for the framework's domestic implementation. Competing interests and orientations between state, corporate and nongovernmental actors were strongly shaped by the existing institutional structure of the domestic context. Singapore corporations were already operating in a highly regulated environment but still faced the perceived expectation that they had to commit to global corporate responsibility principles. Furthermore, a non-adversarial civil sphere did not effectively bridge corporations' pragmatic interests with the state's more ceremonial approach to corporate responsibility. As such, research on decoupling as an outcome of globalization should examine not only the direct targets of global policy but also countries' existing institutional structures and how the impact of global policy varies between countries of different historical trajectories and institutional configurations.

Second, lateral decoupling generates considerable uncertainty about the scope and domestic applicability of global policies. I argued that the consequences of decoupling do not cease with organizations merely disconnecting formal policies with outcomes. Lateral decoupling prompted corporations to manage uncertainty by producing narratives and ideologies of corporate responsibility to align their corporate responsibility commitments with existing organizational identities and constraints. My findings also revealed how the narrative strategies of business depended on the type of corporation in question. Transnational corporations and large domestic companies were relatively free from resource constraints and were more likely to emphasize narratives of organizational values, community and tradition. Small businesses that were conscious of cost and resource constraints were more likely to employ competitive advantage narratives. Research on global policy and local outcomes should not assume that the impact of global processes terminates with decoupling or even loose coupling. Although world society research has identified decoupling as an endemic issue, corporations are organizations that are continuously shaped by existing domestic influences. Environmental uncertainty may push corporations to proactively respond to decoupling by producing new narratives of organizational action in situations where standards and implementation are uncertain but pressure for conformity is high. Whether these narratives consist of values and tradition or competitive advantage, future research can examine how global policy practitioners can better tailor global frameworks to better suit the organizational identities and requirements of different corporations that subscribe to the same corporate responsibility objectives. Targeting different narratives of corporate responsibility may better aid both global and local networks of actors to 'recouple' existing corporate practices with global principles.

To what extent do these findings speak to the concern among researchers and practitioners about whether corporate responsibility efforts lead to actual improvements in social and environmental outcomes? Existing research on this matter has been largely mixed, with some noting the considerable challenges in building a 'market for virtue' (Vogel, 2005). This is due in large part to the voluntary nature of the global corporate responsibility movement, with few legal guarantees or measures to hold corporations accountable to their corporate responsibility promises. In that light, this paper's attention to the lateral decoupling among state and non-state actors' orientations suggests that actual improvements in corporate responsibility outcomes depend heavily on how best state and non-state actors can harmonize their orientations in the absence of explicit regulation. The findings of this paper contribute to the existing literature by providing an analytical framework where the orientations of the state, corporations and civil society can be relationally assessed at the national level (Matten & Moon, 2008), rather than just the firm- or industry-level approaches of most existing studies that may overlook the larger institutional context. In the case of Singapore, the analytical framework has highlighted how ceremonial, pragmatic and non-adversarial orientations, respectively, have contributed to decoupling and considerable uncertainty. These orientations may differ when the analytical framework is applied to a different case study, but the utility of the framework stems from its more general applicability. Where these various interests can be put into collaborative dialogue, some research has suggested that voluntary corporate responsibility efforts can yield concrete, if compromised, outcomes (Bartley, 2007; Locke, 2013).

As corporate responsibility doctrines continue to develop, the 'business case for corporate responsibility' has gained much salience, as supported by the competitive advantage narratives among the business interviewees, especially from small-to-medium enterprises, presented in this paper. Whether competitive advantage leads to actual corporate responsibility outcomes, of course, remains to be seen, and this can provide fruitful avenues for future research. Nevertheless, symbolic postures by organizations, even when highly ceremonial in nature (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), may provide state and non-state actors the leverage to push corporations to make good on their corporate responsibility commitments. In their study of global human rights, Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005) describe a 'paradox of empty promises' whereby social movements used nation-states' ceremonial commitments to human rights standards to pressure governments to live up to those promises. One can easily imagine a similar institutional process at work with corporate responsibility (Lim & Tsutsui, 2012), and studies along these lines have already strongly suggested that social movements target prominent corporations to push for visible social and environmental outcomes (King, 2008; Soule, 2009).

One final point of discussion should perhaps address whether Singapore is a special case, given its particular political economy as a semi-authoritarian state (Rodan, 2005) with a mix of communitarian characteristics and state-led capitalist development (Chua, 1995). As noted in this paper's discussion of the

Singapore context, Singapore's economy is highly dependent on foreign investment and trade. The Singapore state's 'industrial targeting' development strategy is often accompanied by the importation of regulatory regimes to comply with the global standards of particular industries. While these features of the Singapore case – state direction, economic corporatism and strong dependence on global institutions – suggest that the adoption of global corporate responsibility ideas is perhaps unsurprising, the subsequent implementation, diffusion or decoupling of corporate responsibility practices still warrants explanation (Phelps, 2007). It is not evident, for example, that transnational corporations employ traditional narratives to connect global principles with domestic practice or that competitive advantage narratives are most prevalent among small businesses interested in engaging with corporate responsibility. Moreover, the lateral decoupling framework presented in this paper, which examines state, corporate and civil society orientations relationally, is not restricted to the Singapore case but can also be applied to a wider range of countries where those orientations would presumably vary and have different outcomes. This is evident in a growing body of research that has begun to take seriously the national context of global corporate responsibility, from developed economies such as Canada (Dashwood, 2012) to precarious developing countries where transnational corporations may bear the responsibility for global standards in the absence of robust domestic governance (Karp, 2015).

Conclusion

This paper's findings complement existing perspectives on globalization by highlighting that the consequences of the diffusion of global policies need to be more vigorously theorized and accounted for. Although decoupling is endemic in the reception of global policies, its domestic manifestations are not solely due to external pressures to conform to global models of appropriate behaviour but also differences among domestic institutions in their orientation towards global processes. This paper has illustrated how the process of lateral decoupling occurs in a specific configuration of state, market and civil society orientations. Future research can consider how alternative configurations in other domestic contexts lead to different domestic responses to globalization, making decoupling less salient than, say, instances of resistance or adaptation. Nevertheless, with the expansion of a greater array of available global principles, decoupling seems likely to increase in global prominence (Meyer, 2010). In the domain of corporate responsibility and sustainability, models of transnational private governance (Bartley, 2007) and supply chain sustainability (Locke, 2013) have gained increasing attention as private solutions to global corporate responsibility concerns, despite significant gaps in the domestic implementation, monitoring and enforcement of those private initiatives. As research continues to scrutinize how global processes and domestic institutions co-evolve and impact one another (Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002; Frank et al.,

2009; Hironaka, 2014), attention to lateral decoupling and domestic responses can aid in providing a more comprehensive account of the efficacy of global corporate responsibility initiatives.

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