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Submitted paper: Path-dependent processes as social processes –  
A discourse theoretical and analytical approach

3<sup>rd</sup> INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON PATH DEPENDENCE

February 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup>, 2014  
Freie Universität Berlin  
School of Business & Economics

**Path-dependent processes as social processes –  
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**Abstract**

Starting with the assumption that ‘history matters’ path scholars draw on self-reinforcing feedback mechanisms in order to explain the increasing determinacy of processes. Recently a growing interest of path scholars in social phenomena can be observed. Re-conceptualizations of traditional path dependence dynamics that explained technological and market processes as well as a stronger focus on methods derived from the social sciences demonstrate this trend. Until now, such advancements have often either focused on theoretical refinements or introduced new methodological approaches. What is still missing however is a clarification of the concept of ‘social process’ and an approach that is able to account for the specificities of these processes, combining theoretical as well as methodological reformulations within a coherent framework. This study aims at bringing both, theory and method, together by proposing an elaboration of path theory and path analysis with discourse theoretical and discourse analytical concepts. The elaboration focuses on the case of the German discourse on corporate social responsibility (CSR) and thereby illustrates the productivity of a discourse theoretical and analytical approach to path dependence.

## Introduction

Path theory has gained increasing importance in explaining all kinds of technological, institutional as well as organizational processes over the last three decades (David 1985; North 1990; Thelen 1999; Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003; Schreyögg/Sydow 2011). These studies focused on a vast array of objects of investigation and followed different theoretical as well as empirical approaches to path dependence. More recently, an increasing interest regarding social phenomena can be observed among path scholars. The application of path dependence to institutional and organizational phenomena e.g. aims to conceptualize path- dependent processes as *social* processes and proposes accordant re-conceptualizations (Schreyögg/Sydow 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow 2010; Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003). On a theoretical basis, new mechanisms have been introduced and assumptions have been adapted that “account for the social setting in which the positive feedback processes are embedded” (Schreyögg/Sydow 2010: 6). These refinements go beyond prior economic and technological explanations for path dependence. In addition to the utility-based dynamics of early path research, recently more and more aspects for explaining path dependence gain importance which are social in nature, such as culture, norms, status, legitimacy or role systems (Beyer 2005; Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2000). Moreover, regarding the empirical analysis of path-dependent phenomena, we can observe an opening to methodological approaches that allow for the complexities and ambiguities of social processes, such as ethnography (Erfurt Sandhu 2013; Stache 2013) or discourse analysis (Hausmann, forthcoming; Hess et al. 2008; Koch 2011) as well as a continuing focus on narrative analyses, now applied to organizational phenomena (Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011).

But although the recent interest in social processes has provided path scholars with insights regarding new fields of research as well as new theoretical and methodological perspectives, the focus seemed to lie more on theoretical advancements or an opening of path theory to new methodological grounds, rather than starting with a clarification of what social processes as unit of analysis imply. The ‘Berlin School’ e.g. has provided path scholars with innovative theoretical refinements concerning organizational and strategic path dependence (Koch 2008, 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow 2010, 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003, 2011) others have contributed to path research by applying the existing models to new methodological grounds (Hess et al. 2010). Coherent re-conceptualizations of path dependence that can account for the theoretical requirements of path- dependent processes as social processes and provide us with accordant analytical instruments are still rare. Such a framework could further develop

path dependence as a theoretical concept that is able to explain social processes and provide researchers with an accordant method that accounts for the requirements of such endeavor.

This paper therefore aims to further the beginning re-orientation of path theory by approaching path dependence from a perspective that is able to add theoretically but also empirically to former work in this direction. A discourse *theoretical* re-conceptualization of path processes as social processes as well as an accordant discourse *analytical* approach are proposed as an appropriate and coherent framework to elaborate on the recent developments in path theory. The paper argues that discourse theory can provide path scholars with fruitful concepts in order to understand path processes as social processes and that discourse analysis is a suitable method in order to approach such paths empirically.

The argument develops as follows. As this study aims at an elaboration of the theory of path dependence by concepts from discourse theory in order to conceptualize path processes as social processes, I am going to first clarify what exactly I mean by 'theory elaboration' and the concept of 'social processes' applied here. I will then argue for discourse theory and discourse analysis as the appropriate framework to understand social processes. In the subsequent section, I am going to discuss the recent developments of the theory of path dependence and the need to further refine them. This leads me to argue how discourse theory in combination with discourse analysis can help to account for the specificities of path dependence in the social context, subsequently providing the reader with propositions for how to approach this framework empirically. The latter is very briefly illustrated by an empirical study on the development of socially responsible business in Germany to then conclude by discussing the propositions made as well as indicating directions for future research in this area.

### **Theory elaboration – social processes as discursive processes**

By theory elaboration I refer to the refinement of a theory or theoretical model with concepts from other theories (Sonpar/Golden-Biddle 2008; Thornberry 1987; Vaughan 1992). Theoretical perspectives as well as empirical findings with different foci or from different areas are used to extend or refine the theory of interest (Thornberry 2006) and "to specify more carefully the circumstances in which it does or does not offer potential for explanation" (Vaughan 1992: 175). Such endeavors aim less at fundamental changes of theories than on sharpening these. Starting from an existing theory, its assumptions and its causal structure are accepted while it is attempted to build a more comprehensive

model by the logical extension of the basic propositions contained in the model (Thornberry 1989: 56). In line with this understanding, this study does neither intend to criticize path dependence per se nor does it aim at fundamental changes regarding this theoretical framework. On the contrary, it is the purpose of this study to underline the usefulness of the theory of path dependence for the social context or, more specifically, for our understanding of social processes.

In order to do so I build on the recent re-conceptualizations that have been made in path research (especially Hess et al. 2010; Koch 2008; 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003; 2011; Sydow/Schreyögg 2009) to then use a different theoretical and analytical perspective in order to reassess our current understanding of path-dependent processes. Drawing on different, even slightly dissenting perspectives in order to develop a theory, while holding on to its overall characteristics, can be a fruitful approach to advance the latter (Thornberry 1989). As we limit our questions to almost the same phenomena or apply new methods to traditional theoretical frameworks we tend to develop our understanding in fragmented and therefore biased or restricted ways rather than searching for integrative options (Vaughan 1992). In path dependence research it can be expected that re-conceptualizations are at least constrained as we apply them to the same (business-) organizational and strategic phenomena<sup>1</sup> or as we apply new methods to the traditional theoretical concepts (Hess et al. 2010; Koch 2011) and therefore achieve only fragmented proceedings. This means, rather than applying the economic model to the social context, we should clarify its specificities and the requirements it implies for theorizing and analyzing path-dependent processes. I therefore draw on the theoretical framework of (organizational) path dependence but try to step back from its traditional cases, explanations and methods in order to open up new perspectives on path processes as social processes.

As this study aims to elaborate path theory in order to better understand and explain social processes it should, secondly, be outlined what is referred to by the term 'social process' and what theoretical and analytical framework these processes as units of analysis require. Consequently, I now attempt to briefly answer the question: 'what exactly is 'social' about social processes?' and therefore start by taking 'social' as a specific characteristic of processes, to then define what this implies for a theoretical and analytical approach.

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<sup>1</sup> Within the organizational realm path scholars until now have been mainly concerned with strategic processes (Burgelman 2002, 2008; Koch 2008, 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011) and thereby remained close to the early fields of economic research as introduced by David (1985) and Arthur (1989).

Social Processes of course are phenomena that first and foremost lie in the interest of sociologists (see e.g. Elias 1977). A specification, therefore, can best draw on sociological understandings of social processes. In this realm 'social processes' are generally understood as dynamic procedures of social relations and interactions between two or more actors or groups (Hillmann 2007: 816, 808-809). The 'social' in this term strongly ties social processes to the notion of 'interaction' and puts a special focus on the fact that these unfold between multiple actors. The word '*social*', it is stated, refers to contexts where actors and groups of actors interact with one another and influence each other (Fuchs et al. 1978: 705). Social '*interaction*', thus, refers to the engagement between actors and is mainly described as being enacted through communication, thus language, symbols, gestures, etc. – social processes are therefore communicative processes (Fuchs-Heinritz 2010: 314). In these processes communication, as we will see, does not have to be constrained to verbal or textual interaction. However, social processes can be designated as dynamic (communicative) procedures of interaction between multiple actors. Where actors interact or communicate with one another, they interpret each other's behavior and actions and, thereby, construct reality (Berger/Luckmann 2000 [1963]). That is, through communicative interaction existent configurations are changed and new ones are created. As such, social processes cannot be perceived as closed sequences of given phenomena or events but rather as being themselves constitutive of reality – besides being products of prior interaction, social processes are themselves productive. Understanding social processes therefore also means understanding communicative processes of the collective construction of reality.

The medium through which we can theorize and analyze these processes are discourses. Discourses can be seen as chains of articulations that set differences between elements and thereby create meaning (Laclau/Mouffe 1985: 105). As *chains of articulations* they inherently provide us with a processual and interactional view on how different actors collectively construct reality. Discourses provide the critical link between the 'reality' of social processes and how we theorize and analyze them. They are *processes* of articulation as they always consist of a series of articulations where one articulation has always to be seen in the context of other, prior articulations (Sarasin 2007). And they are *social* processes as discourses are seen as the totality of the linguistic and non-linguistic articulations that in their relation, in interaction, create meaning (Laclau/Mouffe 1985, 1987). Their basal functioning is to relate elements to one another in order to structure the social.

It is discourse theory, and especially the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985, 1987), that understands all social processes as processes of linguistic and extra-linguistic communication and, thus, as discursive processes. Such understanding implies a non-essentialist epistemology (Torring 2005). This refers to the perception that the truth about things or events is not pre-given but depends on meaningful structuration: "outside of any discursive context objects do not have being; they only have existence" (Laclau/Mouffe 1987: 85). Laclau and Mouffe regard every social configuration as meaningful and consequently do not perceive discourses as only written or spoken text but do rather see them as the totality of all linguistic and non-linguistic practices (Laclau/Mouffe 1987: 82). This means that also perception, thought and action are seen as discourse as they depend on meaningful structuration (Laclau 1993: 431).<sup>2</sup> In such framework, all social interaction is embedded in and depends on a relational and differential system. To perceive the social as discursive therefore means that society is perceived as a differential system and that reality is only accessible through discourse. On a methodological level this must mean to bring forth approaches that allow for different interpretations of different actors in different times and therefore acknowledge the ambiguity and variableness that these interpretations can hold, rather than reducing the social realities to standardized models and linear descriptions. Discourse analysis as a method has not only been developed in close relationship with discourse theory and does therefore coherently realize what discourse theorists propose, but additionally has a special focus on the differences and similarities between the interpretations of different actors in collective processes of reality construction. It is aware that knowledge about social interaction cannot be accessed directly or identified neutrally but is always already embedded in a relational and purely differential system of signification (Methmann 2010: 352, see also Sarasin 2007). It is therefore perceived to be a suitable and coherent analytical framework for the analysis of social processes.

## **Path processes in the social realm**

In order to elaborate on the theory of path dependence for its application to social processes I focus on the three main characteristics of path-dependent processes: their historicity, the self-reinforcing mechanisms as well as the lock-in (Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003). These three aspects do characterize different and sequential phases in path-dependent processes: Starting with the assumption that

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<sup>2</sup> That also action and objects are seen as discursive does not imply that the existence of objects is denied, it rather underlines the fact that objects are meaningful only in their relation to other objects and it is discourse that sets them in relation to one another (Laclau/Mouffe 1985; 1987).

'history matters', path scholars draw on self-reinforcing or positive feedback mechanisms in order to explain the increasing determinacy of processes and how these become persistent or 'locked-in'. For each aspect I am going to discuss the recent developments to then propose a discourse theoretical advancement.

## History

Path dependence theory, from its very beginnings, has been presented and received as a historical theory. Besides its origins in historical economics, path scholars have always highlighted the "necessity of history" (David 1989), have underlined its "overarching relevance" (Schreyögg/Sydow 2011: 323) as well as that history "does not matter only occasionally – it always matters!" (Sydow et al. 2009: 692). Some even state that path dependence is nothing more than "history matters" – a perspective that has rightly been criticized as insufficient (Breznitz 2010: 14, 28; Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011: 82; Schreyögg/Sydow 2010: 4; Sydow et al. 2009: 705). The importance of history for path dependence has also been acknowledged by others as the work of path scholars has been widely published in journals with a special historical interest<sup>3</sup> and as path dependence is often referred to in historical research (e.g. Clark/Rowlinson 2004). So besides being a process theory one could state that the theory of path dependence has as well been presented and perceived as a *historical* theory.

Quite strikingly, regarding the above mentioned positioning of path dependence in historical research, an explicit definition of the notion of 'history' in path theory is missing. Whereas the emphasis on "the importance of past events for future action or, more precisely, of foregoing decisions for current and future decision making" (Schreyögg/Sydow 2010: 4) has certainly helped to overcome the a-historical orientation in economics as well as in organization and management studies, the understanding of 'history' in path research has not been developed any further over the last years. Most of the more recent studies that deal theoretically and/or empirically with path dependence do neither define what they mean by 'history' (z.B. David 1985; Krugmann 1991; Schreyögg/Sydow 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011; Sydow et al. 2009), nor do they clarify its relationship with concepts, such as the past, that are regarded as important for an understanding of 'history' in current historical research (Clark/Rowlinson 2004; Durepos et al. 2012; Weatherbee 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> These are e.g. "Economic History" (David 1985), "The Journal of Economic History" (Cowan 1990), "Management and Organizational History" (Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011), "Business History" (Engel 2012) and "Historical Social Research" (Semenova 2012).



Apart from the lack of an explicit discussion of what history means and how we, as path researchers, can approach its development, it seems implicitly taken for granted that past events are objectively given events (Breznitz 2010: 19) influencing present and future behavior of actors that have only to be uncovered in order to reconstruct how these events evolved. It is often stated that, in order to understand a phenomenon, we have to understand how it developed (David 2007: 93; Pierson 2000: 252), to then elaborate on *how* the past or history (two terms often used synonymously, see e.g. North 1990; Sydow/Schreyögg/Koch 2009: 690) influences present and future choices. History is said to matter *because* the present and the future are connected to the past, e.g. by specific investments or decisions made in the past (David 1985; Arthur 1989; Krugman 1991), by the continuity of institutions (North 1990: vii) or by organizational structures that have been adopted in the past (Koch 2011: 339). What these explanations lack is a discussion on how we can understand 'history' and how we can empirically approach the past.

The overall opaqueness of 'history' as a concept and the implicit realist ontology in path theory lead to several issues. One may be the inconsistent importance and conception of history in different phases of path processes – a problem already noted by path scholars (Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003). Another consequence, which is of special importance for a conceptualization of path processes as social processes, is that such perspective denies the 'social character' of history. It thereby leads to the application of concepts and methods that do not account for the fact that 'history' is never something objectively given by (sequences of) past events, but has rather to be understood as a collective or social construction of these events (in the present) (Durepos et al. 2012). As path theory treats historical developments as objectively reconstructable sequences of given events, it ignores the social aspects of the processes it aims to uncover and is thereby threatened to become an unreflexive approach where empirical knowledge of the world is taken to be the world (Weatherbee 2012: 205).

What has lately been offered in order to examine history and to acknowledge space for its interpretation without being trapped by the 'anything goes' of pure historical relativism, is a form of theorizing and analyzing history as collectively constructed. The so called "relational" approach to history "means looking at the politics of representing the past by tracing actors symmetrically (treating each with the same curiosity) and surfacing the past-as-history in its multiplicity" (Durepos et al. 2012: 269). Such approach seems apt for an understanding of the history of social processes as it allows taking the tensions between different interpretations of past events as insightful rather than seeking to reconstruct the past 'as it was'.

A concept that can account for the collectively constructed character of history and thereby help path dependence to understand processes as social processes is 'discourse'. I argue that discourse *theory* and the methodological approach of historical discourse *analysis* can provide a suitable frame to reconstruct how different actors construct the past-as-history and thereby could help to overcome the 'a-social' understanding of history in path theory. Discourse theory treats discourses as strongly connected to the social conditions of their genesis (Chalaby 1996) and, thus, as highly historically shaped (Foucault 1981 [1969]; Sarasin 2007). Via texts, discourses preserve and transmit the past. They always build on existing, historically prior discourses so that present and future discourses are influenced by what has been constructed as 'the past'. That is, discourse theory provides us with an understanding of history as part of the social construction of reality rather than seeing history as an objective sequence of events. Discourse theory accounts for the heterogeneity and ambiguity of actors' perceptions of the past and thereby allows us to acknowledge its multiplicity.

For the historical *analysis* of social path processes such a relational perspective would imply to reconstruct how different actors have translated the past into history (Durepos et al. 2012), how they collectively negotiated what we treat as 'the past'. The methodological approach of discourse analysis aims exactly at an understanding of how different actors produce meaning through the production and dissemination of texts and how these processes construct reality. *Historical* discourse analysis looks at these processes in time and attempts to reconstruct how different actors have, in interaction, constructed their realities in different periods of time (Brinton 2001; Landwehr 2001). Thereby discourse analysis follows a reflexive approach to history that does not treat the document as a transparent and 'truthful' witness of the past but rather sees each text as part of a series of texts, searching for similarities, structures and common interpretations and thereby trying to understand what (groups of) actors perceived to be the past (Sarasin 2007). Such an approach allows us to capture the subjectivity and changing nature of 'history' and, thereby, to understand the past-as-history.

The relational perspective that discourse theory applies to discourses (as series of texts and articulations) and the possibilities that are offered by an analysis of these collectives of texts as produced by a variety of actors, allows us to understand what *interpretations* of the past now influence the actor's present and future choices so that we can understand the "history matters" as already being part of a social process.

## **Self-reinforcing mechanisms**

In order to explain path-dependent developments, the literature on the topic has in its early years mainly focused on mechanisms of self-reinforcement that are ultimately grounded on utility oriented rationales such as increasing returns or network externalities (David 1985; Katz/Shapiro 1986). These mechanisms, unfolding in “a world of potential predictability and efficiency” (Pierson 2000: 253), were measurable and could be mathematically represented (Arthur 1989; David 2007). Although some of these mechanisms of self-reinforcement include high levels of social interaction (such as e.g. coordination effects or adaptive expectations) and could therefore be seen as directly applicable to the explanation of social processes, path theory has ultimately explained them by rational, utility-driven decisions of individuals.

Recent work in institutional and organizational path dependence research has changed the focus towards self-reinforcing mechanisms that are also driven by cognitive, emotional and political dynamics, aiming not at the exclusion of the former mechanisms but at their extension (Pierson 2000; Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011; Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003, 2011). That is, the scope for self-reinforcing mechanisms has been broadened to all kinds of positive feedback mechanisms in order to go beyond individual, utility-oriented explanations and to account for the social dynamics of such processes (Schreyögg/Sydow 2010: 6). These mechanisms are perceived more complex and, due to a lack of easily measurable indicators, more difficult to analyze than cases of purely economic path dependence (Pierson 2000).

Conceptualizing positive feedback processes in a social context should focus even less on the utility of individual actors and even more on the interaction between actors. This does not necessarily imply to fully exclude utility-aspects but to shift the focus of the concepts and methods we use to understand these dynamics towards communicative aspects. Above all, social processes as collective interactions are driven by all kinds of rationalities and are therefore hard to grasp from an economic standpoint. Efficiency e.g. can neither be perceived as objectively definable (Esser et al. 1998) nor as a critical decision criterion for actors in the social context (Beyer 2005). This is also especially due to effects of power, traditions, norms or bounded rationality (Beckert 1996). Referring to social processes as procedures of communicative interaction between actors, we have to acknowledge that ‘efficiency’, ‘utility’, ‘costs’, etc. can be perceived differently by the actors involved and that all criteria are products of collective processes of reality construction. What is defined as ‘efficient’ or ‘costly’ cannot be seen as given, but is negotiated between actors. Besides that, such negotiation processes can also result in all kinds of other criteria. Criteria as well as their definition can therefore vary between

actors as well as over time. The subjective and changing nature of these criteria should be regarded as insightful and an analysis of positive feedback mechanisms should include the processes of defining relevant criteria as a communicative act between different actors.

Discourse theory focuses on such negotiation processes between actors and tries to explain why certain definitions come to prevail over others (Munir/Phillips 2005). Through discourse analysis researchers are able to understand how certain meanings evolve and unfold importance for actors so that certain choices are rendered more likely than others. Discourse analysis attempts to identify what actors are involved in these processes, what kind of strategies they exert as well as how these lead to certain meanings (Nonhoff 2006; 2007). This method is therefore able to account for communicative aspects of positive feedback mechanisms, which are regarded as relevant for the social context.

First attempts have been made to conceptualize positive feedback mechanisms from a discursive perspective. Hess and colleagues (2010: 204) e.g. perceive the performative and constraining character of discourses as important for the development of certain paths and propose to take the interplay of “storylines” and “actors” as explanations for political path dependence. They show empirically that certain discourses gain importance through the supported of political actors, but they do not provide us with an actual mechanism or a theoretical explanation for such dynamics. In order to coherently theorize path processes as social processes, I therefore supplement this first idea with further concepts from discourse theory.

Following Hess and colleagues (2010) in focusing on the interplay between discourse and discourse participants, we can define ‘storylines’ as lines of articulations that forward a certain argument and thereby provide the discourse with a trend; the ‘actors’ on the other hand produce, re-produce and diffuse these arguments by referring to them as discourse participants. Drawing on these ideas and refining them with further concepts from discourse theory, we have to first highlight that in discourse theory, discourses and actors are seen as “equiprimordial” (“gleichursprünglich”), that is, structure and actors simultaneously constitute each other rather than one being the product of the other (Nonhoff 2006: 209). This means it is prior discourse that restricts what can be said and therefore what subject-positions are created while at the same time actors adopt certain definitions, diffuse and translate them and therefore partly influence the direction, present and future discourses are taking. Both discourse and actors therefore reciprocally constitute, but at the same time, constantly subvert each other (Scherrer 2005: 8). What follows from this is that the unfolding and evolution of certain discourses on the one hand strongly depends on the active support of actors (Nonhoff 2006) adopting certain

arguments to make themselves heard as a voice in the discourse (Laclau 2007a: 43). But on the other hand, this perception implies that the actors can neither as individuals nor as collective actors change these structures voluntarily (Scherrer 2005: 9). This paradoxical relationship constitutes what has been described as a “double movement” in discourse theory (Laclau 2007b) and what can be understood as a positive feedback mechanism in path theory.

Only when certain articulations are adopted by actors and then constantly referred to, these articulations are likely to become part of the overall discourse. Those arguments or storylines are therefore likely to influence the discourse that form so called “nodal points” or “inclusionary frameworks” (Bruell 2007; Stäheli 2007). Such frameworks enable storylines to subsume all kinds of (even seemingly contradictory) articulations under the same signifier and thereby attract different actors (Laclau 2007b; Stäheli 2007), which in turn leads to a further support of that storyline. In discourse theory the logic of equivalence, by relating single articulations as similar relative to a certain claim, accounts for the inclusion of articulations in these frameworks and potentially awards them with importance, while at the same time departing them from their original demand (Laclau 2007b). Here, the recursive “double movement” is set into place: on the one hand certain arguments experience an increase in influence with the inclusion in a chain of articulations, but on the other hand they can become disconnected from their initial purpose (Iedema/Wodack 1999: 11; Laclau 2000: 56) they do not further represent their initial claim. Consequently, the discourse unfolds its own dynamic; the persecution of individual objectives is – despite an increased overall influence – not guaranteed (Laclau 2007b: 88 f.).

It has been highlighted that the possibility for actors to influence the discourse is limited, but is expected to increase for elites and groups or collectives of actors (Nonhoff 2006; Scherrer 2005). The concept of discourse coalitions accounts for this observation (Hajer 1995; Lehmbruch 2001; Nonhoff 2006). Via the joint reference to certain arguments, so called discourse coalitions (Hajer 1995; Lehmbruch 2001) are built between discourse participants. Such coalitions can be actors from different backgrounds and with different interests. Irrespective of their political or social position or their reasons to support certain arguments, they constitute coalitions via a shared set of articulations (Hajer 1995: 65; Nonhoff 2006: 201). Arguments that are able to function as nodal points or inclusionary frameworks for the formation of such coalitions are most likely to become salient and stable parts of a discourse. As discourse coalitions built around certain storylines become stronger, the storylines they refer to acquire importance and constitute discursive spaces where the articulation of certain demands is more possible than others

(Nonhoff 2006: 193). Discourse coalitions develop and sustain particular ways of talking and thinking about a topic (Hajer 1995: 13) so that consequently a certain discourse is formed which allows some storylines to unfold importance while suppressing others.

The identification of such inclusive dynamics – between the formation of integrative storylines on the one hand and the constitution of discourse coalitions on the other hand – that, in relation, set a discursive trend in place and forward certain meanings rather than others is critical for an understanding of the development of path processes as social processes.

### **Lock-In**

Lock-ins in technological and economic path dependence have been described as states of hyper-stability or irreversibility (David 1985; Arthur 1989). Actors in this kind of situation are deprived of their power to flexibly alter their decision or action patterns. Thus, the predominant characteristic of this phase is its immobility. The impact of this immobility or rigidity becomes specifically salient in situations where more efficient alternatives exist and the once chosen path mismatches the (new) requirements. These conceptions of lock-in were first and foremost based on cost-arguments, such as the irreversibility of investments (David 1985). In this pattern of explanation, investments in learning efforts or financial investments caused the incapacity to abandon a certain technological standard.

Path scholars with institutional conceptions of path dependence were the first to add normatively justified situations of lock-in, such as habitual behavior, values or traditions (North 1990) and made first steps towards a social conception of lock-in. In institutional and organizational contexts lock-ins are now described as dominantly cognitive, normative or resource-based in nature and, most likely, as combinations of these three types of lock-in (Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2011: 325). Even though empirical evidence of these conceptions is still rare and the difference of normative and cognitive conceptions of lock-in remains quite vague in the literature, the possibility is highlighted that the phenomenon of lock-in can be grounded on a variety of entities.

Besides these changes, a further important refinement of this phase of path dependence is that the determinacy of the lock-in has been slightly loosened. This is consequential to the fact that “due to their social character, organizational processes are more complex and ambiguous” and that, compared to economic processes, “they are not likely to amount to a concrete monopolistic solution that excludes any further choices” (Schreyögg/Sydow/Holtmann 2011: 85). Consequently, for social contexts, lock-ins are constructed as ‘only’ *restricting* the scope for social action rather than hindering *any*

deviant action (Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2011). This acknowledges the fact that in social contexts, situations of absolute inflexibility are very unlikely to happen (Ackermann 2003: 230) and that almost no social decisions are completely irreversible (Breznitz 2010: 28). Scholars have shown e.g. that the rigidity of organizational and institutional lock-ins can vary. Koch (2011) demonstrated that the “remaining range of variety” and, thus, the rigidity of a lock-in in path-dependent organizations is determined by the organizational context and whether this confirms or disconfirms the path. Beyer (2005) emphasized that the rigidity of lock-ins is dependent on the mechanisms that caused the path dependence (see also Mahoney 2000). Consequently, rather than to fully exclude change, we should perceive lock-ins as situations “with a very low potential for endogenous change” (Vergne/Durand 2010: 743), leaving a small space for variation (Martin/Sunley 2006; Pierson 2000; Thelen 1999), where at least incremental changes are possible (North 1993). With the notions of “institutional layering” and “institutional conversion” for instance, Thelen (2004) proposes two possibilities for such on-path changes, where small transformations are reached without abandoning the path.

Summarizing these current refinements we can state that lock-ins of social processes are described as states of decreased flexibility that can be explained by different reasons, such as norms, cognitive schemas or resources among others. As these bases are difficult to measure and as they can be expected to vary in time and between actors we are, also for the third phase of path dependence, facing an increased complexity in analyzing and explaining path dependence in social contexts. First attempts to theorize and analyze these situations from a discursive perspective have mainly focused on the stability of certain discourses (Hess et al. 2010). They define as path dependence “the prevalence of certain speakers and storylines” that determine the possibilities to think and act and consequently lead to a shortage of acceptable alternatives (Hess et al. 2010: 204).

Discourses, to different degrees, determine the possibilities of what can be articulated, allow certain ways of thinking and acting more than others and thereby exclude alternative ways to do so (Methmann 2010: 353; Phillips et al. 2004: 638). Often, the integration of certain articulations occurs on the expense of others. Such constellations of restriction arise through processes of naturalization and normalization, where contingent articulations and interpretations become diffused and accepted so that “some meanings may become seemingly taken for granted, reified, and thus definitively authoritative totalizations” (Brown/Humphreys 2006: 234). That is, certain meanings come to prevail over others, specific relationships between signifier and signified become

fixed and are unlikely to change. Laclau and Mouffe term such states hegemony (Laclau/Mouffe 1985).

The concept of hegemony, especially in its discursive reading, can be seen as “a means to understand the processes through which certain conceptions of reality come to hold sway over competing worldviews” (Mumby 1997: 343). Hegemony therefore seems as an appropriate discourse theoretical concept to elaborate on the lock-in as part of a social process. Discursive hegemonies are seen as processual phenomena. Hegemonic processes are processes of constriction or closure and therefore of increased determinacy. The latter is not reached through power or violence but has a strong consensual character (Laclau 2007a: 44). Hegemonies result from interaction between groups that struggle for analytical autonomy (Laclau 2007a) and only ‘succeed’ through the internalization of certain principles or arguments by big parts of society. Hegemony is therefore not about the predominance of certain actors but describes the dominance or preponderance of certain patterns of articulation, certain constellations of meaning within society (Nonhoff 2006: 137; auch Angermüller 2007: 167).

But as the reproduction of existent discourses as well as the maintenance of discursive hegemonies always include new interpretations of the existent, total rigidity is unlikely. When the social world is understood as discursive and all meaning being socially constructed there is no fixed or pre-given structure, discourse theory rather perceives the social as contingent and always threatened through the richness of the social context (Methmann 2010: 352). Yet this does not mean that relations cannot become stable, it rather urges us to perceive such fixations as products of radical struggles and exceptional phenomena that are in need of explanation.

The integration of a certain storyline in the hegemonic discourse is a mixed blessing (Laclau 2007b: 88, also stated above). On the one hand, the articulation gains importance and range, on the other hand the inclusion in an hegemonic discourse goes hand in hand with a partial abandonment of its identity (Laclau 2007b: 88 f.). The totalitarian discourse follows its own dynamic, a dynamic that is neither predictable, nor determinable for individual actors. It is here, where the (potential) inefficiency of social path processes has its roots. Whereas some actors succeed in forwarding their articulations (as these become the nodal points for storylines), others lose their particular claims to the universality of these storylines. What results as a discourse can therefore be expected to be in the interest of only some of the actors. The ‘inefficiency’ of social paths will therefore be perceived differently by the discourse participants.



## **Analyzing path processes in the social realm**

The preceding sections have shown how the beginning re-conceptualizations of path-dependent processes in the social realm can be furthered by the concept of 'discourse'. Now, I would like to show possibilities to apply the elaborated framework in an empirical study in order to propose a methodology for the analysis of path-dependent processes in the social context and to demonstrate the advantages and challenges of the proposed elaborations within the setting of an empirical analysis.

### **How to approach path processes in a social setting**

In the following section I would like to 'operationalize' the proposed framework drawing on former path analyses (especially as presented by Sydow et al. 2012) as well as on discourse analyses that provide appropriate concepts for this endeavor (Bruell 2007; Nonhoff 2006; Glasze 2008). I build especially on the work of scholars that have already applied (organizational) discourse analysis in order to analyze path dependencies (Hess et al. 2010; Koch 2011), but go beyond their ideas regarding the concept of discourse as well as their conceptualization of feedback mechanism and lock-in in order to sharpen the analysis of path processes as social processes.

Some elements are regarded as especially important for empirical path analyses, such as the specification of different levels of analysis and how they interrelate, the definition of relevant actors and their relationships to one another, specific self-reinforcing mechanisms or positive feedback-mechanisms and how they evolve as well as the specification of the lock-in (Sydow et al. 2012: 4-8). For a discursive analysis of path processes these elements are described with concepts from discourse analysis. The latter builds on the discourse theoretical framework outlined above in order to coherently approach paths processes from an empirical perspective.

The smallest unit of analysis in discourse analysis is the demand, articulation (Laclau 2007b: 72) or statement (Hess et al. 2010: 205). Such demands refer to a certain topic and are articulated by single actors or groups of actors via all kinds of texts. An articulation can consist of a single term or of one or more sentences and a single text can contain several demands. Via texts, articulations can be linked to certain actors or groups of actors. Discourse analysis then aims at defining what has been said by different actors and how these articulations sediment to stable patterns of statements (Sarasin 2007: 206). These patterns constitute the next level of analysis, the so called storylines (Hajer 1995; Hess et al. 2010) or chains of articulations (Laclau 2007b). A chain of articulation contains a variety of articulations that are related to one another by a

common theme or 'story'. As these chains of articulations gain importance they construct a specific discourse.

Consequently, three levels of analysis can be identified: the articulations, the storylines and the discourse. The latter represents the most abstract level, it is constituted of a range of storylines that themselves contain a variety of demands or articulations. As discourse analysis focuses on the articulations of several actors and follows all actors for a certain time period, it becomes possible to trace the formation of storylines that ultimately and under certain conditions form a discourse. Storylines may evolve and disappear or they gain (different degrees of) importance and influence while the discourse develops. In order to unfold and, then, retain or even increase relevance, the storylines have to be produced (articulated) and reproduced as well as broadened by (groups of) actors.

As stated above, it is this interplay between the storylines and the actors supporting them, where feedback-mechanisms can be expected to occur. Referring to positive feedback mechanisms as "an increase in the likelihood of an action happening at  $t_1$ , if the same action has been conducted by the same (or other) actors at  $t_0$ " (Dobusch/Schüssler 2012: 618) an analysis of such effects in the social context should focus on the increased likelihood that a certain belief system or meaning is continually and increasingly reproduced. As a discourse is constituted by a specific set of storylines and its likelihood to be forwarded increases with the quantity of actors supporting these storylines (Hajer 1995; Nonhoff 2006), an analysis should concentrate on exactly these two concepts: the discourse participants supporting a set of storylines and those storylines that give the discourse its specific trend. An accordant analysis can start by identifying the actors and arguments that are important for a certain storyline, to then analyze what arguments are referred to by certain actors and how shared references to certain arguments lead to the formation of discourse coalitions.

As described above the increased support of a storyline by actors or discourse coalitions on the one hand leads to their increased importance. But at the same time the reproduction will lead to the inclusion of new interpretations so that the increase in importance is likely to go hand in hand with a greater breadth of the storyline. This, in turn, allows ever more actors to follow its arguments. A recursive process is set in place between references to a storyline, its widening through the inclusion of new interpretations, which again leads to increased potential for the integration of actors that in turn results in an even higher reference to the storyline. The tasks of identifying the development of the quantity of discourse participants as well as the composition of the storylines are part of the discourse analysis and are interpretive in nature.

The positive feedback mechanisms lead to the predominance of a certain discourse. With the consensus regarding a certain trend, arguments and storylines that deviate from this trend are less likely to surface on the level of the discourse so that over time the discourse becomes constraining and is, at the same time, in itself constrained. On an analytical basis and regarding the conceptualization of such a lock-in in the social realm, this concept implies the importance or dominance of certain storylines on the one hand (Hess et al. 2010: 204), but has also to account for their stability or persistence on the other hand (Sydow et al. 2012). This could mean that alternative framings of a certain theme are considered to be niches (ibid.: 5) or that diverging storylines are outside the imagination of actors.

Borrowing from the concept of discursive hegemonies (Laclau/Mouffe 1985; Laclau 2005) in order to conceptualize a lock-in in the social context, the increasing dominance of a specific discourse can be defined as the diffusion of certain, interrelated storylines that are widely supported by discourse coalitions and that are difficult *not* to refer to if one aims at an effective discourse participation (Nonhoff 2006: 379). The dominance of a certain set of storylines, then, can be identified by analyzing the number of their references as well as considering the size and strengths of the discourse coalitions that support these storylines. That is, the quantity of references per storyline, the number of overall storylines supporting one discourse as well as the number of actors and discourse coalitions referring to these storylines can be used as 'measures' for the *dominance* of a certain discourse. Besides that, it is furthermore important to analyze whether the dominance of a discourse is *persistent* over time. The stability of storylines and their supporting actors over a certain time period can be a first indicator for the persistence of a discourse. Even stronger evidence could be derived from an ongoing exclusion of deviant storylines that attempt to change the current discourse or the hindering of upcoming discourse coalitions following alternative paths, through e.g. ridiculing their positions, disregarding their arguments or questioning their authority as discourse participants.

### **The development of socially responsible business in Germany as an exemplary case for a path process in the social realm**

Now, the findings of an empirical study on the development of socially responsible business in Germany are described very briefly in order to demonstrate how the above developed framework can be applied.

Starting from the observation that the discussion on socially responsible business in Germany over the last years has increasingly focused on the so-called “business case for CSR”, the empirical study aims at an analysis of the emergence and development of that concept. Its current dominance is puzzling as it has been widely criticized (among others Archel et al. 2011; Banerjee 2003, 2008; Jones/Fleming 2013; Owen et al. 2000; Vogel 2005) and due to the deviant history of the German discussion on corporate responsibilities that, in its beginning, was characterized by all kinds of different arguments and did not focused exclusively on profit-motives. In order to understand this development the study focuses on an analysis of those actors that are most salient in the discussion, namely corporations, CSR-associations, political actors, employer and employee representatives as well as business scholars.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis was supported by software for qualitative data analyses, called MAXQDAplus. All texts were imported and ordered time-wise and actor-wise. In an iterative process between literature and empirical material a coding scheme regarding the concepts of socially responsible business and the business case for CSR was developed. In such way, the articulations of single groups of actors could be identified and analyzed over time. The codes regarded the actor’s definition of socially responsible business as well as their positioning towards the business case for CSR. Codes regarding the latter were derived from the CSR-literature and refined with the empirical material at hand. They included e.g. statements regarding the voluntariness of CSR, its relation to the competitive position and financial performance of the firm as well as its positioning in the overall strategy of corporations. These aggregated codes were regarded as storylines comprising different arguments. The storyline regarding the voluntariness of CSR, e.g. was composed of arguments forwarding the voluntariness of CSR, rejecting regulations, supporting negotiated agreements or highlighting the self-regulating forces of markets.

In a *first step*, the analysis focused on how actors individually and collectively referred to the concept of socially responsible business and the business case and whether these references changed over time (for single actors and collectively) as well as when change occurred.

The results show that the discussion on the social responsibilities of business in post-war Germany mainly focused on questions regarding co-determination and economic democracy in a rather general way. Employers and employees as well as political actors were the most salient participants in the discourse. It was around the 1970s and

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the data, see Table 1 (Appendix).

beginning 1980s that the discussion began to consider also environmental and other societal goals. Business scholars joined the discourse and a corporate engagement became discernible. In these years the discourse on socially responsible business was characterized by all kinds of arguments – pro and contra societal and environmental responsibilities of business, in favor of and against state intervention, promoting or rejecting business ethics, etc. Those arguments constituted a heated but more or less balanced debate. Goals were explicitly defined and expressed and even though socially responsible business at that time was not free from business arguments, such articulations were not formulated as objectives or necessary outcomes of socially responsible business and were expressed only by some of the discourse participants.

One of the earliest business case arguments concerning socially responsible business was that of voluntariness. Even before the entrance of most of today's discourse participants, the voluntariness-debate had been part of the discourse. Early evidence for this theme can already be found in the debate on social accounting in the 1970s. Mainly forwarded by corporate actors, these arguments go hand in hand with more general debates on business regulation and express a strong faith in the market. It was also around the 1970s that co-determination was presented as being “good for business” for the first time. At that time these arguments remained without consequences, as they were only forwarded by some actors and could not be included in wider storylines concerning socially responsible business.

It was not before the late 1990s and beginning 2000s that single business-oriented arguments reappeared which were now integrated in more elaborated lines of argumentation. Only a few years earlier the debate had begun to take place under the signifier of “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) and discussions were increasingly characterized by a strong emphasis on so called “win-win arguments”. That is, a quasi-naturalistic relationship between corporate performance and responsibility was promoted that constructed both as non-conflicting and naturally linked to each other. Further space for such arguments was gained with the upcoming notions of “sustainability” and the “triple bottom line” that naturalized the inclusion of business activities towards the end of the 1990s. Business and economic goals became part of the discourse, as e.g. claims for corporate gains from ethical engagement. As such, social responsibility was more and more positioned as part of corporate strategy which opened room for new actors to participate. New discourse participants joined the discourse (such as CSR-associations) and existent participants took up different and more active roles. The federal government e.g. brought CSR to the political agenda, only with the beginning 2000s. Also employers started to explicitly discuss this topic around that time. With the entrance of these actors

more and more business activities were included in the concept of socially responsible business. The voluntariness-principle e.g. became the leading claim of CSR-associations and the federal government, the latter actively promoting CSR as a means to risk and reputation management.

Summarizing this brief overview, it can be observed that over the last 60 years the discussion on socially responsible business changed regarding the participation of groups of actors as well as regarding their collective construction of the meaning of the term. The history of socially responsible business in Germany can therefore be described as a process of collectively defining and changing the meaning of this concept. Whereas actors promoted dissenting concepts of responsible business in the early years, they recently seem to agree on a construction of CSR as a business case. It is therefore interesting to further analyze this growing consensus.

This is where the *second step* of the analysis puts its focus. As the historical analysis showed, the change towards concepts such as “CSR”, “sustainability” and the “triple bottom line” opened up opportunities to legitimately integrate questions of competitiveness or risk management into the notion of socially responsible business. With the inclusion of ever more business activities the concept was widened and business oriented storylines could now easily be integrated. That is to say that with the construction of an equivalential relationship between responsibility and business under the notion of the business case, the discourse could integrate both, business and responsibility arguments. Ever more actors could then participate and forward their own business-focused interpretations of socially responsible business that before could not have become part of it. Those arguments that combined business and responsibility were widely interpretable and could therefore integrate the most actors. That is, these arguments could function as nodal points for the formation of discourse coalitions and via this joint support by different actors became most salient.

-----*insert figure 1 here*-----

As figure 1 depicts (see Appendix), the growth of the business case, that is, the increasing number of its advocates and the diffusion of its logic (the set of beliefs the business case arguments share) was forwarded by the increasing breadth of the concept of socially responsible business which also made the integration of more and more actors possible. Reproducing the business case storylines, these actors added their own interpretations, further widening the storylines. It is exactly this recursive and reinforcing

mechanism that lead to the promotion of the business case. The integrative power that the concepts of 'sustainability' and the 'triple bottom line' introduced into the discourse on socially responsible business furthered the trajectory of the business case and ultimately led to its dominant position.

In a *third step*, the analysis focused on the dominance and persistence of this current construction in order to understand its dominant position as well as its rigidity. As the preceding analysis along with a review of former business case studies has shown the business case can be constructed by different storylines that each follow the same instrumental logic but are based on slightly different goals. Assuming that actors may pursue only one of these lines of arguments or may be involved in all arguments at once (Kurucz et al. 2008: 86), the latter would make the case for an even stronger reliance on the business case. Consequently, this study focused on the quantity of distinct business case storylines referred to by single actors as well as the quantity of (groups of) actors supporting each argument to account for the lock-in of the business case.

The results of this step demonstrate that recently all actors support the business case for CSR in one way or another and that the discourse is unlikely to change as arguments that deviate from the business case storylines are excluded.

-----insert figure 2 here-----

Although providing only a static picture of the discourse, figure 2 (see Appendix) offers insights concerning the collective composition of the business case, with regard to the types of arguments that jointly constitute and promote the business case in the recent German discourse.<sup>5</sup> Some are supported by all actors, some by smaller samples of actors. The voluntariness-argument and the emphasis on competitive advantages e.g. can be perceived as especially important for the construction of the business case in Germany whereas arguments which construct the socially responsible business as risk- and reputation management are supported by less actors. They can therefore be interpreted as having a subsidiary rather than primary role.

Figure 2 also depicts the distinct actors taking part in the discourse on socially responsible business. Even though composing it differently, all actors are following the business logic in one way or another, showing the overall dominance of this CSR-construction. Not only do the single actors mostly refer to more than one of the business

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<sup>5</sup> Figure 2 depicts the results of an analysis of CSR-related statements for the last 10 years.

case arguments, these arguments also seem to unite actors to discourse coalitions regarding each single storyline (Hajer 1995; Lehmbbruch 2001). Irrespective of their position in the field of socially responsible business or the reasons to support particular arguments, the actors support the business case by constantly and collectively referring to its various storylines. Whereas e.g. the storyline that constructs CSR as voluntary builds a nodal point for the constitution of a discourse coalition comprising all participating actors, the storyline on risk- and reputation management instead only attracts some of the actors.

Summarizing these findings, we can say that the business case in the recent German discourse on socially responsible business is constructed by a set of distinct arguments which build certain storylines. As these are supported by different coalitions of discourse participants, they jointly forward the overall logic of the business case in the discourse and maintain its dominant position.

Several arguments make a change of the discourse seem unlikely and underline the persistence of this dominant meaning. Firstly, the more arguments follow the same logic and the more actors support this logic, the more it can be expected to be difficult to follow different paths. The participation of unions in the discourse illustrates this argument. Although being in favor of legally binding regulation, they could only become part of the discourse abiding by its logic. As a consequence, with the increasing diffusion of the business case unions agreed to the voluntariness of CSR thereby abandoning their initial arguments. The (discernible) promotion of deviant arguments was no longer possible, the business logic as the dominant pattern has been fixed in the discourse and developed a quasi-deterministic character that binds the discourse to this rationale. So while the choice of how to construct socially responsible business at the beginning was not much restricted, it was increasingly constrained as the business became the guiding principle that forced new arguments to adjust to its logic.

Moreover, the dense net of actors and arguments supporting the business case makes a change of the discourse difficult and, therefore, less likely. For the first time in the discourse's history, a certain CSR-construction is supported by such a large number of discourse participants. Due to the far-ranging support of the business case storylines, supporters of deviant arguments are likely to be ignored (Farrell/Quiggin 2012). Furthermore, a change of the discourse's overall logic would make a change of all arguments necessary which, due to their interrelatedness and joint support, also seems unlikely. This seems all the more doubtful as the broad support of the business case by actors holding an expert status (especially political actors as well as the CSR-associations) can be expected to influence large parts of society (Hess et al. 2010;



Schneider et al. 2009) and therefore to even further the overall consensus. Consequently, the current dominant construction of socially responsible business as a business case has to be understood as persistent.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

With this study I argued for a closer connection between theoretical and methodological developments regarding the re-conceptualization of path processes as social processes. This goes together with the claim for a precedent clarification of ‘social processes’ as unit of analysis. The latter were defined as communicative processes of interaction and regarded as reproducing as well as producing social reality. As meaningful interaction between actors, it was argued that these processes should be theorized and analyzed from a discursive perspective. In order to further elaborate the recent advancements in path theory, I proposed a discourse theoretical as well as discourse analytical framework, focusing on the three main characteristics of path-dependent processes – history, self-reinforcing mechanisms and lock-in –, aiming to clarify how these can be understood in social contexts.

It was especially highlighted that an understanding of ‘social processes’ requires path scholars to even stronger acknowledge the ambiguity and multiplicity of those processes, in theory as well as regarding their methods. All phases of path-dependent processes in the social realm have to be examined with a focus on the collective communication processes between actors as well as the heterogeneous and changing meanings that result from these processes.

The analytical framework proposed in this study aims to facilitate the analysis of social processes and can be applied to the study of different social settings. A first example of such endeavor is provided which reports on the results of an empirical analysis regarding the recent developments of the discourse on socially responsible business in Germany. It could be demonstrated that the proposed theoretical and, especially, the analytical framework are applicable and useful in order to understand the development and resulting persistence. Whereas the latter can appropriately capture the development of path processes, the former acknowledges and emphasizes the role of verbal and non-verbal communication in the ‘becoming’ of path dependencies and thereby provides us with an understanding of path mechanisms that go beyond economic reasoning.

With the framework presented in this study the research on path dependence has gained wider applicability and further phenomena to study. Future research could focus on further empirical analyses regarding path-dependent social processes or could attempt to

answer questions regarding the interruption or dissolving of path-dependent social processes. The importance of the latter is especially highlighted by the empirical case presented here, as an effective engagement of corporations in socially responsible business is hindered by the current construction of CSR as a business case. First ideas in this direction have already been developed (Garud et al. 2010; Schreyögg/Sydow/Koch 2003: 278-279). These could also be furthered with the theoretical and analytical framework proposed in this study.

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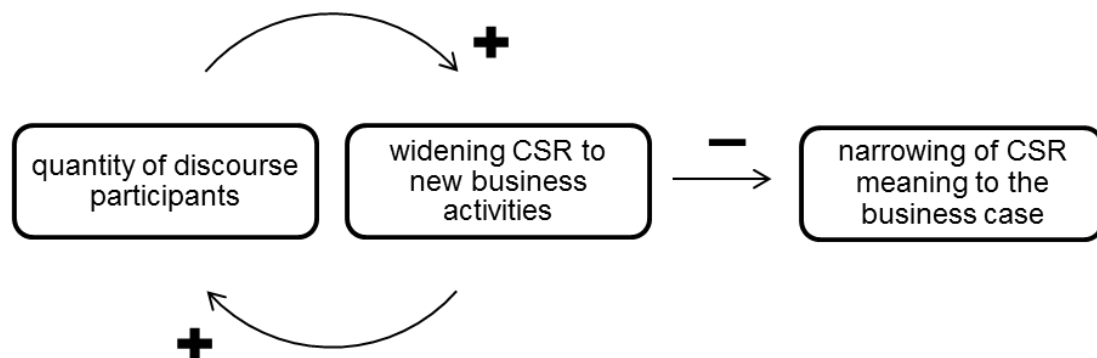


## Appendix

TABLE 1: data Inventory

articulating subject	data type	quantity	time frame	original data source
<b>Corporations</b>	CSR-Reports	130 reports ≈ 10.082 pages	1995 - 2010	corporate homepages
	Econsense	3 statements ≈ 34 pages	2001 - 2012	homepage Econsense
<b>Academics</b>	textbooks	4 editions ≈ 110 pages	1950 - 2012	business department library
	scientific articles, books	≈ 40 books, articles	1950 - 2012	(online-)libraries
	dissertations	4 dissertations, ≈ 841 pages	1950 - 2012	libraries, universities
<b>Business Press</b>	Handelsblatt,	22 articles, ≈ 44 pages	1986 - 2012	magazine online archive
	Manager Magazin	29 articles ≈ 91 pages	1999 - 2012	magazine online archive
<b>Economic-Political</b>	DGB	22 statements ≈ 249 pages	2000 - 2013	DGB homepage, online archive
	BDA/BDI, CSR-Germany	5 statements ≈ 114 pages	2004 - 2012	homepage CSR-Germany
	expert supervisory boards	2 statement ≈ 13 pages	1950 - 2012	homepages of accordant ministries
	federal government, CSR-made-in-Germany	12 statements ≈ 170 pages	2000 - 2012	homepage CSR-made-in-Germany and accordant ministries

FIGURE 1: Self-reinforcing mechanisms on the discursive level



**FIGURE 2: Discourse participants supporting business case arguments**

		<b>discourse coalitions (groups of actors supporting the business case arguments)</b>					
<b>the business case for CSR</b>	<b>voluntariness</b>	corporations	corporate association	employers/ industry	employees/ unions	federal government	business press
	<b>competitive advantage</b>	corporations	corporate association	employers/ industry	employees/ unions	federal government	-
	<b>risk and reputation mgmt.</b>	corporations	-	employers/ industry	-	federal government	business press