

**Understanding strategic decision-making through a multi-paradigm perspective: The case of charitable foundations in English football**

Journal:	<i>Sport, Business, Management: an International Journal</i>
Manuscript ID	SBM-02-2016-0005.R2
Manuscript Type:	Research Paper
Keywords:	CSR, Multi-paradigm, Strategy, Football, Charitable Foundations, Decision-making

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Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the efficacy of using a multi-paradigm perspective to examine the relationship between CSR and strategic decision-making processes in the context of charitable foundations.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This paper integrates and synthesizes the micro-social processes of *assessable transcendence* (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014) with Whittington’s (2001) perspectives on strategy. *Assessable transcendence* was achieved from the constant comparison of categories developed through an early iterative process in which data collection and analysis occurred during the same period. Thirty-two interviews were conducted among a sample of key managers in the charitable foundations for the first two divisions of English football.

**Findings:** The present study illustrates empirically that strategic decision-making in charitable foundations does not ‘seat’ neatly in any one of Whittington’s perspectives. On the contrary, this study indicates a great deal of overlap within these perspectives, and suggests that conflicting paradigms should be celebrated rather than viewed as signs of theoretical immaturity. Multi-paradigm approaches can potentially reveal insights into the ‘mechanics’ of managerial decision-making that are not easily discernible from a mono-paradigmatic perspective.

**Originality/value:** This is the first empirical work that (a) examines CSR in relation to strategy within the context of the English football clubs’ charitable foundations, and (b) does so by employing a multi-paradigm perspective on strategy formulation and implementation.

## Introduction

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is generating increased interest in management studies (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012) and in different industry-specific contexts such as hospitality (e.g., Henderson, 2007), tourism (e.g., Inoue and Lee, 2011), finance (e.g., Matute-Vallejo *et al.*, 2011), tobacco (e.g., Cai *et al.*, 2012) and sports (e.g., Bradish and Cronin, 2009; Breitbarth *et al.*, 2015). Both conceptual and empirical scholarly activities have emerged regarding organisational behaviour and human resource management (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2016; Morgeson *et al.*, 2013; Rupp *et al.*, 2006), marketing (e.g., Maignan and Ferrell, 2004) and operations (e.g., Brammer *et al.*, 2011). Such diverse research has focused on employees' (e.g., Rupp *et al.*, 2013) and consumers' (e.g., Sen and Bhattacharya, 2001) perceptions of CSR, the possible link between CSR and financial performance (e.g., McWilliams and Siegel, 2000) and the different governance models for CSR implementation (e.g., Husted, 2003).

However, works examining CSR in relation to strategy have been few and far between. Although several conceptual research developments linked CSR with strategy (Bruch and Walter, 2005; Porter and Kramer, 2006) and empirically elucidated the strategic implications of CSR (Foss, 2011; McWilliams *et al.*, 2006; Powell *et al.*, 2011), the building of CSR into strategy remains a challenging exercise (Galbreath, 2009, p. 110). According to McElhaney (2008), 'strategic CSR' refers to "*a business strategy that is integrated with core business objectives and core competencies of the firm, and from the outset, is designed to create business value and positive social change, and is embedded in day-to-day business culture and operations.*" (p. 5). Although definitions like the aforementioned are valuable, there is still a profound lack of management studies through which to explicitly study the relationship between CSR and strategy – a correlation that could be "*fertile ground for theory development and empirical analysis*" (McWilliams *et al.*, 2006, p. 2). This shortage may stem

not only from the fractured, complex and vague nature of the CSR concept (Dahlsrud, 2008), but also from disagreement among practitioners, researchers and theorists concerning strategy – what it is and how it is carried out (Whittington, 2001). The complex relationship between strategy and CSR has led researchers to dissect the complexity using single disciplinary lenses (e.g., Siegel and Vitaliano, 2007). A multi-paradigm perspective is another way to address this shortcoming and may provide a better integration of understanding the complexities of strategic CSR viewed through managers’ decision-making processes (e.g., Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014; Brown 2005; Cornforth, 2004; Miller-Millesen, 2003; Van Puyvelde *et al.*, 2011).

This paper contributes to the extant literature by illustrating the efficacy of using a multi-paradigm perspective to examine the relationship between CSR and strategy by synthesising two related frameworks (see Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014; Whittington, 1993). We draw on the context of charitable foundations not only because these organisations are now becoming the prime delivery mechanism for CSR across various sectors (Anheier and Daly, 2007), but also because empirical research is scarce (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2017; Pedrini and Minciullo, 2011; Petrovits, 2006). Our reasoning corresponds to that of Brown and Guo (2010), who recognised that like other non-profit organisations, foundations face multiple indeterminate challenges that force their boards and managers to make (strategic) choices about organisational operations, although researchers often must empirically consider responses within a particular subsector of the broad non-profit organisational environment. We developed these observations in our research, which focused on charitable foundations within the football industry and specifically how strategy is formulated in CSR-related programmes. Therefore, in this paper, the concept of CSR is used to describe how football clubs in England’s top two tiers have mobilised resources for a variety of outreach and community- related programmes. This approach responds to the call in Godfrey *et al.* (2010)

for management scholars studying socially responsible business practices to consider specific manifestations of CSR and take into account *relevant industry contexts and forces* (emphasis added).

Indeed, examining CSR in the sport business context is both timely and relevant. First of all, the professional sport industry fosters social value, including improved physical (Pringle *et al.*, 2013) and mental (Henderson *et al.*, 2014) health, enhanced education (Lambourne, 2006), and social inclusion (Jarvie, 2003). Given their high visibility, however, professional teams in particular have been accused of irresponsibility and living beyond their means, as reflected in the growing instances of peculiar governance structures (Walters and Hamil, 2013), irresponsible practices (Hu *et al.*, 2012), and financial mismanagement (Dimitropoulos, 2011). As a result, this conflicting and challenging role of professional teams as profit-maximizing businesses and utility maximizing social and cultural institutions (Morrow, 2003) has provided impetus for the emergence of numerous CSR initiatives (Babiak and Wolfe, 2013), thereby highlighting the unique features that sport businesses have over their counterparts in other commercial sectors (Smith and Westerbeek, 2007). Against this background, understanding how key organisational actors go about formulating and implementing strategic CSR is a current managerial and research gap that the present study aims to address.

This introduction is followed by a concise account of the generic perspectives of strategy, as Whittington (2001) proposed, and a description of the managerial decision making framework *assessable transcendence* (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014). The subsequent section is devoted to the methods employed in this study. Then, the crux of the paper integrates and synthesizes the micro-social processes of *assessable transcendence* with Whittington's (2001) perspectives on strategy in the context of charitable foundations of English football. Thus, we illustrate the relevance of employing a multi-paradigm perspective

to understand how CSR strategy is formulated.

**Theoretical background**

*Generic perspectives on strategy*

Although managers recognize the need to blend socially responsible practices with strategy (e.g., Bruch and Walter, 2005; Porter and Kramer, 2006), neither theorising about nor practicing the two simultaneously is easy. Whittington’s (2001) grid of the four perspectives on strategy offers a friendly way to overcome such ‘difficulty’, especially in charitable organisations. However, the intention is neither to revisit the debate of how strategy can (or should) be done nor to reconcile the different perspectives. Rather, partly aligning this study with Henderson and Zvesper (2002), we discuss how Whittington’s framework can be used to theoretically understand the strategic decision-making behind CSR in football charitable foundations. According to French (2009), Whittington (2001) emphasised non-profit-making outcomes more than many other scholars, and consequently his framework appears to be the most relevant to examine charitable foundations. What’s more, along with the ethical, philanthropic actions appeared to be the most significant within the CSR context in the sport business industry (Sheth and Babiak, 2010); philanthropic actions are, by and large, expressed through charitable foundations (Anagnostopoulos and Kolyperas, 2016; Kolyperas *et al.*, 2017). Whittington (2001) summarised in a simple and enlightening way the different assumptions about how business, strategy and decision-making work. Drawing on the classical, evolutionary, processual and systemic perspectives on strategy, Whittington (2001) explained their fundamental differences in two aspects: the outcomes and the processes by which strategy is made. Vertically, the focus is on whether strategy aims for profit maximisation or other organisational goals and possible outcomes. Horizontally, the grid is divided into deliberate and emergent processes (see Figure 1).

TAKE IN FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Formulating and implementing strategy from the classical perspective means “*profitability is the supreme goal of business, and rational planning the means to achieve it*” (Whittington, 2001, p. 11). Such a perspective has found both early (e.g., Chandler, 1962; Ansoff, 1965; Sloan, 1963) and later (e.g., Porter, 1980) proponents who demanded that the conception (formulation) of strategy be separated from its execution (implementation) and that the dynamic environment in which an organisation operates not be seen as a problem because it is essentially predictable (Henderson and Zvesper, 2002).

Like classicists, the evolutionists also approach strategy with the belief that organisational survival rests on profit maximising. However, the main difference between the two perspectives lies in the role the environment plays in formulating and implementing strategy. Contrary to the classical perspective, which advocates that managerial activity can control environmental conditions through screening and positioning, evolutionists conceive the environment – and its numerous forces that affect organisational strategies – as “*too unpredictable to anticipate effectively*” (Wittington, 2001, p. 3). From this perspective, strategy cannot be that deliberate. Rather, organisational success or failure is determined more by the continuous struggle to achieve the best possible environmental fit than by any environmentally detached managerial calculation.

Processual approaches to strategy acknowledge managerial inability to calculate rationally a highly complex and unstable environment, and therefore, favour the evolutionists’ more emergent approach. The fundamental tenets of this perspective lie in the cognitive limits of rational action (March and Simon, 1958), and the micro-politics of organisations (Cyert and March, 1963). Contrary to the evolutionist perspective,



processualists are skeptical about profit-maximising outcomes mainly because organisations are not united in optimising a single utility (such as profit), but are essentially coalitions of individuals with their own personal objectives and cognitive biases (Wittington, 2001).

Whittington (2001) argued that contrary to the two process-oriented perspectives (processual and evolutionary), systemic theorists do not downgrade organisations' capacity for forward planning within their environments. Moreover, the fundamental difference between the systemic and classical perspectives is that the former concerns managers (that is, strategic decision-makers) who are profoundly rooted in thickly interwoven social systems rather than detached individuals who are 'calculating' the optimal strategic actions required to move forward. The adoption of such a relativist stance denotes that (a) not all organisations are perfect profit maximisers, and (b) compromises and influences are not restricted to the internal (organisational) level, but extend to a wider (local) network that defines both the means and the ends of organisational decision-makers' actions.

*Assessable transcendence: a decision-making framework*

'Assessable transcendence' is a context-specific framework that illustrates how charitable foundation managers make CSR-related decisions in English football (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014). Charitable foundations in this particular context differ from those in other industries (such as Coca-Cola, Tesco and Microsoft) in that these non-profit organisations deal directly with both the 'parent' company (in this case, the football club) and the professional sport league, but also indirectly with social actors and agencies that mandate CSR-related programmes through central funding mechanisms. This dual nature augments the complexity of the process and the dynamics among organisational actors (Anagnostopoulos and Shilbury, 2013). In essence, *assessable transcendence* explains the three steps that characterise the decisions foundation managers make concerning programmes



that aim to satisfy leagues' recipes for specific programmes and impact on the local society.

Through the micro-social process of *harmonising*, foundation managers aim to fulfil charitable foundations' social objectives, whereas through *safeguarding* they aim to achieve the parent football club's business objectives. Ideally, *harmonising* and *safeguarding* are complementary. However, implementing CSR does not occur smoothly through simply contributing to the local community (see *harmonising*) or servicing the parent company (see *safeguarding*). Well planned communicative strategies at both the internal and external levels (see the third step of the process: *manoeuvring*) are required for the first two micro-social processes to occur at all (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014). At the same time through *manoeuvring*, managers aim for *transcending*, which in turn may lead to a more impactful and strategic CSR.

In metaphorical parlance, *assessable transcending* is a 'balancing act' between organisational and institutional pressures. From an organisational perspective, *safeguarding* - by and large - relates to the necessary 'resource allocation' (tangible and intangible resource combination across the 'parent' club and the foundation) so the implemented community programs become more strategic (Kihl *et al.*, 2014) as well as more impactful (Walker *et al.*, 2015). It also refers to 'internal motivations' associated with features of legitimisation and offsetting (Slack and Shrives, 2008), as well as with the viability of the very same charitable foundations as organisational entities (Bingham and Walters, 2013). Lastly, *safeguarding* concerns the embedded (or otherwise) CSR into the 'culture' of the organisation (as a whole: 'parent' club and foundation as one unit), which can (easier) lead to competitive advantage into both the business (for the parent clubs) and the nonprofit (for the foundations) environment.

From an institutional perspective, *harmonising* concerns those conditions that have a bearing on managerial decision-making. The 'boundaries' define the level of diffusion

between the ‘parent’ club and the foundation, which, in turn, determine the facilitation of strategic management principles that allow for the necessary adjustment when circumstances ask for (Kolyperas *et al.*, 2017). The ‘form of institutionalisation’ concern the level of dependence not only between and across the two entities (parent club and foundation), but also between the foundations and statutory organisations (Walters and Chadwick, 2009). Lastly, *harmonising* relates to ‘stakeholder pressures’, which allow charitable foundations to showcase their responsiveness to a wide range of social issues (Walters and Panton, 2014).

*Assessable transcendence* is depicted in Figure 2. Although *manoeuvring* appears to balance *safeguarding* and *harmonising*, this is not to suggest that reality in the examined context is that well-adjusted. Rather, the role of *manoeuvring* is to ensure that the organisational mission of either entity (‘parent’ club and foundation) is met (to the best of foundation manager’s ability) through continuous and concrete (hence assessable) ‘CSR impact’ in social and business form alike (Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014).

TAKE IN FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

**Method**

An exploratory analysis was undertaken grounded in data collated from semi-structured interviews with managers from football charitable foundations from the same cultural context. Recognising that CSR is often a matter of resource availability and other business agendas, our purpose was to allow foundations to account for their decision-making process and agendas. As a result, *assessable transcendence* was achieved from the constant comparison of categories developed through an iterative process in which data collection and analysis occurred during the same period.

*Research setting*

The current study is populated by the charitable foundations of the top two divisions of English football: the 20 football clubs with a Premiership status (Premier League or PL) and the 24 football clubs with a Championship status (Football League Championship or FLC). There are clear reasons for focusing only on the top two divisions of English football. The most pertinent relates to the mechanics of funding allocation that support the formulation and implementation of CSR. Despite the variations in this area, there is a direct link between the clubs from these two divisions - they can be relegated or promoted from one league to the other. The PL demonstrates this link by financially assisting those football clubs that are relegated to the Championship with 'solidarity money'. Given that the available fund of money for CSR-related projects is much larger for PL clubs than FLC clubs (Anagnostopoulos, 2013), this playing-status link between the two divisions – and subsequently the implications this has on the strategic development of CSR-related projects – could be only captured by examining charitable foundations of clubs from both divisions. Although the variation between PL clubs and FLC clubs when it comes to CSR funding allocation is substantial, this is not the case between clubs with FLC status and the FL's remaining 48 clubs in Leagues 1 (FL1) and 2 (FL2). This fact was the primary reason behind a more practical decision with regard to the population of this study. Trying to approach (and subsequently visit) 48 more football charitable foundations across the country would have made the task impractical, considering issues of time, cost and also the amount of data that would have to be managed.

The choice of drawing on the English football context was made on the fact that it is this country where the strongest institutionalised forms of CSR have evolved (Hovemann *et al.*, 2011; Kolyperas *et al.*, 2017; Walters and Tacon, 2011). The interviewees were considered key participants for two reasons: First, they were directors, heads and senior managers, which meant they were directly responsible for setting strategic goals and

overseeing CSR. Second, key personnel from these charitable foundations offered insights on the role these organisations have (or do not have) in their overall strategic orientation as well as day-to-day operational CSR activities of the parent football clubs. Thus, organisational actors from these foundations discussed CSR implementation processes and social drivers behind these processes, along with barriers that these nonprofit organisations have faced, and continue to, or will potentially face towards the strategic application of CSR in this particular setting.

*Interview guide and procedures*

Thirty-two interviews were conducted among a sample of charitable foundation managers between 2009 and 2011 as part of the first author's doctoral thesis. All the interviews were conducted as face-to-face meetings and took place either in the participants' offices or in rooms within the football grounds booked for this particular purpose. On two occasions meetings were held in a public place. The sample provided a good mixture of football playing status (at the time of the interview) as it consisted of 12 charitable foundations whose 'parent' clubs had PL status, and 12 charitable foundations associated with FLC-status clubs. Of those 32 managers, five were working directly for the club (yet responsible for the CSR strategic agenda), 20 were engaged with the club's charitable foundation and one had dual capacity in both organisations. On two occasions, more than one member of the foundation or club was interviewed at the same time.

The interview guide was flexible to the direction of the conversation and the specific organisational context (e.g., whether the charitable foundations had PL or FLC status). Examples of the initial questions during the interviews included, *inter alia*: tell me about the job you do here; what do you think of CSR?; share with me your beliefs regarding CSR issues in relation to your job; describe the values that affect decisions or actions you undertake in your job; talk to me about today's professional football; what does CSR mean

for you?; what is the role of the foundation here?; how does CSR ‘happen’ here?; what drives the application of CSR here?; what do you think CSR means for the wider public (fans, sponsors, other stakeholder groups)?; does CSR work?; how do you know it works (or doesn’t work)?

The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Following transcription, member checks were conducted (Newman, 2000) and appropriate changes were made on three occasions. All informants were guaranteed anonymity, and no names were recorded on the transcriptions at any point in the research. Accordingly, interview transcripts were assigned numbers and letters that correlated to each interview. For example, an interview with a manager from a foundation in the Premier League was labelled ‘PL-fc1’ and in the Championship, ‘FLC-fc1’. The numeral indicated the specific participant, recognisable only to themselves and the authors.

Following the tenets of the Straussian grounded theory coding technique (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), all data were manually coded and analysis was conducted using the constant comparative approach, as synthesised by Spiggle (1994), through the seven-stage process of categorisation, abstraction, comparison, dimensionalisation, integration, iteration, and refutation. In the present paper, however, we offer a thick description of these findings in the form of ‘data extracts’ in order to demonstrate the main tenets of Whittington’s (2001) argumentation on strategy. In the following sections, we discuss *assessable transcendence* and its three (plus one) micro-social processes (*harmonising, safeguarding, manoeuvring* and *transcending*) in context with Whittington’s (2001) generic perspectives on strategy. This analysis illustrates that strategic decision-making in charitable foundations does not ‘seat’ neatly in any one of Whittington’s perspectives, which points out the possible need for a multi-paradigm perspective.

## Findings and discussion

*Assessable transcendence from a classical perspective*

According to the classical perspective, the strategy of a professional football club should be geared towards profit maximisation. During the past 20 years or so, football clubs have increasingly been incorporated into the commercial leisure sector (Hamil and Chadwick, 2010), yet these companies are far from constituting a profitable business sector (Hamil and Walters, 2010). Indeed, the net debt of the 20 PL football clubs at the end of the 2013–2014 season amounted to £2.4 billion, while the net debt of the 22 Championship football clubs for the same period was £1.1 billion (Deloitte, 2015). Granted, debt is part of financing, not the financial result of those companies, but the above-mentioned figures suggest that either a football club’s strategy is not geared towards profit making in strict financial terms or its strategy is somehow problematic (Olson *et al.*, 2016).

Foundation managers acknowledge the business-related pressures their parent football clubs face to compete in an increasingly commercialised environment. Managers’ decisions (largely expressed through *safeguarding*) also can be considered deliberate and aimed at business performance, which ultimately can lead to competitive advantage over other entertainment forms (Walker and Kent, 2009). This is close to what Cortsen (2014) coins ‘commercial idealism’, which suggests the need for “*a cohesion between the idealistic in helping society via sports and the commercial aspect of profiting from it*” (ibid, p. 90). However, while the parent club’s primary interest through CSR-related programmes may be “*to see bums on the seats*” (FLC-fc4), foundation managers view their job as to “*do things for the good of the charity and for the good of the community*” (FLC-fc10). Despite the indirect support foundations offer to the parent club through various community programmes, foundation managers operate charitable organisations under various regulations that highlight the relationship between key stakeholders and good performance. One foundation manager said:

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5 *I have to make sure that the charity runs; I have to make sure that money is coming in*  
6 *to pay wages. We're not-for-profit so we have to make sure there is enough money to*  
7 *pay everything. And then I have to answer to the trustees who run the charity (FLC-*  
8 *fc7).*  
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16 In contrast, the only football club CEO who participated in this research stated emphatically:  
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21 *The core objectives of CSR? I would say the profit, people, planning – well, the*  
22 *driving force behind the football club is winning football matches. That's the core*  
23 *business and that's what we are judged on. I get judged on profit. That's what my job*  
24 *is: to run the business and make a profit. If social responsibility can be integrated*  
25 *into that, that's fine, but is it going to be a driving force for me? No, because I don't*  
26 *see immediately where that's going to improve my profit lines (PL-fc5).*  
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36 These divergent priorities and attitudes between parent clubs and foundations  
37 exemplify Whittington's (2001) dimensional outcomes. Here, one camp (the parent club)  
38 favours an instant, hard business-related outcome, while the other (the foundation) is guided  
39 by a soft, more socially driven rationale. What's more, the foundation managers are required  
40 to make decisions in an unstable, not easily calculable environment characterised by two  
41 principal parameters that form the inner and outer context (Pettigrew, 1985) in which  
42 decisions are made. The first parameter is the 'playing status', or whether the parent club is a  
43 Premier League or a Championship team. This parameter does not apply equally to all  
44 foundations, but in theory all teams can be relegated or promoted. If that happens, there are  
45 consequences for funding opportunities from both 'institutionalised' pots of money and third-  
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party partners or sponsors. The second parameter refers to the landscape in which charitable organisations generally operate, characterised more often than not by financial uncertainty and instability. This environmental flux in which football foundations operate recently led Bingham and Walters (2013) to call for these organisations to diversify their revenue streams, ideally through long-term social partnerships that address commercial organisations' CSR agendas. Therefore, *assessable transcendence* clearly does not relate solely to profit maximising, nor can it bring the optimal outcome simply by good planning and mastering the inner and outer environment. Consequently, it would be difficult – if not inaccurate – to argue that the classical perspective on strategy guides CSR decisions in English football.

*Assessable transcendence from an evolutionary perspective*

The principal tenets of the evolutionary perspective may not seem to inform *assessable transcendence* because the evolutionary perspective identifies profit maximisation as the natural outcome of strategy and profit maximisation is arguably not the only driving force in managerial decision-making regarding CSR. However, this statement might be an overly simplistic assumption for two reasons. First, the foundations' social initiatives nowadays differ greatly in scope and scale from the strictly football coaching programmes that had been their focus for years. One reason for this expansion is that corporations – in search for 'commercial idealism' as per Cortsen (2014) - with CSR ambitions have become more interested in sports as a vehicle for deploying social initiatives and amplifying their branding impact (Smith and Westerbeek, 2007). For example, in 2008, 255 projects used sports as a mechanism to facilitate development (Levermore, 2010), and multinational enterprises (MNEs) are now increasingly using sports for their CSR agendas (Bason and Anagnostopoulos, 2015). This state-of-affairs among these charitable organisations requires some *harmonising* with these (new) environmental forces. To some degree, not much

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3 deliberate strategizing occurs, as “*markets, not managers, choose the prevailing strategies*  
4 *within a particular environment*” (Whittington, 2001, p. 17). One foundation manager  
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6 concurred:  
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11 What seems to have happened in terms of finance and resourcing is that all of a  
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13 sudden the outside world has seen what football can contribute to this area, which is a  
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15 good thing” (PL-fc4).  
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21 However, environmental fit is not restricted to the diversification of the foundations’  
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23 operational portfolio, in accordance with private sector intentions; ‘adjustment’ and  
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25 ‘responsiveness’ to more traditional pools of funding dictate strategic directions. One  
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27 participant characteristically noted, “*Actually, we don’t decide what issues we should focus*  
28 *on; if we can use the term loosely “society” decides that for us*” (PL-fc2). Another illustrated  
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30 the same idea, referring to a specific action that the organisation was about to undertake:  
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36 *We are proposing to get into working with 25-plus people who are redundant because*  
37 *the money is all moving there anyway. The government clearly cannot have 10,000*  
38 *people here made redundant and not put money into trying to resolve that (FLC-fc5).*  
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45 Second, although foundation managers’ decisions are not guided by the profit-  
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47 maximising motif (because these are charitable organisations), these managers recognise that  
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49 good CSR means good ‘business’. Thus, ‘trading surplus’ (which is ‘profit’ in charitable  
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51 organisations’ parlance) ensures the foundations’ own viability. A participant noted:  
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56 *[...] We’ve got that as a backdrop, so we’ve got certain amount of money in the*  
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3 *charity that, if I do touch it, probably that would be the end of the time for me because*  
4 *that money is for us to deal with the worst case scenario. So we have put in a pot of*  
5 *money [...] definitely we're not money-orientated, but just give us a drive to think that*  
6 *money is there. It is our safety net (FLC-fc7).*

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14 Furthermore, foundation managers unequivocally stated that they use caution when  
15 making decisions about how to implement CSR. The following statement illustrates this  
16 careful thinking:  
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23 *We will only appoint staff and deliver projects off the back of funding that is*  
24 *confirmed; we won't speculate and do it because we think we can get this or we think*  
25 *we can secure that. We will appoint and we will run things once the funding is*  
26 *confirmed (FLC-fc6).*

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34 Such actions corroborate one of the principal tenets of the evolutionary perspective,  
35 which considers managers as conscientious individuals whose prime objective is to ensure  
36 organisational survival through sound operational rather than strategic decisions. For  
37 example, a participant said:  
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45 *When I first started [...], the foundation was in all sorts of mess. The year before I got*  
46 *here, we reported losses of £123,000, and it had been for six years, loss, loss, loss,*  
47 *loss, loss, loss. So the club financially assisted with a loan, restructured, got rid of*  
48 *some staff [...] with regards to strategy and direction in the foundation, and which*  
49 *way we will go in, wide open; and to be honest there probably wasn't a lot of interest*  
50 *in it because the major problem was financial and structural and commercial. So it's*  
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3 *all about just steadying the boat, just get us back on track, do whatever you need to*  
4 *do to get the finances in check and to get the staff in check and to just sort the*  
5 *organisation out. It wasn't about strategy; it wasn't about direction; it wasn't about*  
6 *the big picture (PL-fc7).*  
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14 These two interrelated characteristics depict 'environmental fit' and 'sensible  
15 operational management', elements of the micro-social processes *harmonising* and  
16 *safeguarding*, respectively, which offer reasonable grounds to assume that *assessable*  
17 *transcendence* manifests principles of the evolutionary perspective on strategy. Moreover,  
18 managers' decision-making seems to be furthered by the apparently good – yet challenging –  
19 timing (characteristic of Cyert and March's garbage can model [1963]) for any business to  
20 demonstrate social responsibility. For example, one participant stressed that:  
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32 With CSR this is the big problem: You open one door and then another one opens  
33 and another one opens. It's very, very difficult to get to the boundaries of whom you  
34 work with (PL-fc1a).  
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41 Therefore, the garbage can model also seems to be at play in the less than orderly  
42 sequence of steps and trial-and-error actions involved in initiating CSR-related programmes.  
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44 These extracts exemplify this condition:  
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49 I think now – from being a top-down decision-making process – programmes and  
50 initiatives can actually start from the bottom, because we have got some good  
51 programmes running – it's embedded in the business. So people can now make  
52 decisions – no make decisions – make suggestions, whereas before we never spoke to  
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each other about [...] For instance, we have been doing some stuff around healthy living. One of the security guards has actually come to us and said, ‘Fantastic. Why don’t we, at the training ground, start an organic garden?’ So that’s coming from a guy that you never see. He has actually come forward with an idea. So it just shows you that in a short space of time the attitudes have changed within the business (PL-fc1a).

We have a staff meeting each week and think about what we can do that’s different this year. We just brainstorm it and banter the ideas around. Oh, [the club’s CEO] is full of ideas – usually crazy ideas that we think that’s bonkers, and then two minutes later you are doing it and it works. So, yeah, a lot comes from [him], a lot just comes from the staff here. It’s both ways (PL-fc3).

Overall, what is discernible is a continuous managerial endeavour for organisational survival in an anything but stable and controllable environment. However, this environment favours greater CSR, often through decisions taken in a haphazard and random fashion. Within such an environment, decision-making processes display some characteristics of profit maximising. Chief among these is prudent managerial activity (cost control), which aims to ensure the foundation’s short-term viability and, indirectly, the parent company’s long-term sustainability (dual *safeguarding*).

*Assessable transcendence from a processual perspective*

*Assessable transcendence* maximises both social and business performance. Without overlooking the importance of profit maximising (in business and charity parlance alike), *assessable transcendence* corroborates the processualists’ pluralistic outcomes of strategy

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3 making. The institutionalisation of CSR in English football though the gradual establishment  
4 of charitable foundations governed by separate boards of trustees and managed by paid  
5 administrators (foundation managers) has created a multi-powered organisational setting  
6 which – perhaps inevitably – also has increased conflicting interests among key  
7 organisational actors regarding CSR formulation and implementation (Kolyperas *et al.*,  
8 2017). For example, these characteristic and revealing extracts highlight this condition:  
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19 We struggle here with engaging the very top people within the football club to  
20 acknowledge what we do, acknowledge the benefit of what we do and almost ...  
21 ‘invest’ is the wrong word because they would never invest in it. For some within the  
22 club we may exist because there is a statutory obligation to have a community  
23 organisation. If they could get away with it they would ... There is one or two [...] So  
24 it is a strange picture, and I am not sure whether they can understand when it comes to  
25 what we do or what we’re trying to achieve (PL-fc9).  
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36 You know about the solidarity money that comes from PL down to the FL clubs,  
37 don’t you? The Premier League decided that the Championship clubs will get more  
38 money from the solidarity fund. So they decided to give a massive amount for the  
39 Championship clubs anyway. League 1 will get £275,000 and League 2 will get  
40 £250,000. All clubs met together and League 1 and League 2 clubs said, ‘No, we  
41 aren’t having that. Championship clubs are getting so much and we are just getting  
42 £250K, £275K’. The Premier League person who was sitting there said, ‘There is no  
43 more money from us. The only pot of money we have got now is the money we give  
44 to the FL Community Trust’. The clubs voted to take that money. The clubs decided  
45 to take that money off their own community foundations [...] In essence we are  
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3 talking about facilitating payments to their costs by £25,000. That's all. So the  
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5 Premier League said, 'We will not give you any more money. There's £1.4 million a  
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7 year that we give to community schemes. If you want, it's up to you what you are  
8  
9 going to do with that'. The clubs said, 'Well, I take them'. So we've been shocked out  
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11 from our own people; they've let us down, or clubs have let us down (Fb-L3).  
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17 Such conflicting interests naturally have led foundation managers to develop political  
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19 skills to achieve the most satisficing (March and Simon, 1958) solution on any occasion. In  
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21 this study, the multiplicity of interests and political compromising – fundamental tenets of the  
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23 processual perspective (Henderson and Zvesper, 2002) – were largely manifested through  
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25 *manoeuvring*, one of the micro-social processes of *assessable transcendence*. *Manoeuvring*,  
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27 expressed more abstractly as internal and external communication, facilitates managerial  
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29 actions in *transcending* both social and business performance. The bargaining process  
30  
31 involves what Cyert and March (1963, p. 31) described as “*policy side-payments*” in return  
32  
33 for agreement (Whittington, 2001). For example, foundation managers may be willing to  
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35 implement a specific community programme with social but not necessarily financial returns  
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37 to satisfy particular parent football club executives:  
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43 ur chief executive sees in it for us being in the community and how important that is.  
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45 Our schools' programmes work runs at a loss every term; we lose money when we are  
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47 out there. We do that because that is the biggest signal of [what] the club wants us to  
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49 do (FLC-fc7).  
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54 Taking this stance, the foundation manager can then “[...] go in and see the chief  
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56 executive anytime I want to. I don't have to wait until the trustees meeting. So I say, 'Look,  
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3 we have got this, we've got that'. We have got this sort of respect for each other" (FLC-fc7).  
4

5 Therefore, strategy becomes "*the product of political compromise, not profit-*  
6 *maximising calculation*" (Wittington, 2001, p. 22). Examining *assessable transcendence*  
7 from the processual perspective brings to the forefront the highly political context in which  
8 foundation managers make decisions, as well as the dynamic environment in which their  
9 organisations operate. Through continual *manoeuvring*, these managers seek to achieve the  
10 most 'satisficing' result at both internal (with the football club, for example) and external  
11 (with partners/funders, for example) levels. In turn, this 'satisficing' result takes them as  
12 close as possible to *transcending* the CSR's social and business outcomes.  
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#### 24 25 *Assessable transcendence from a systemic perspective*

26 The systemic perspective examines the influence of the wider social forces, culture and  
27 institutions that impinge on various business strategies (Henderson and Zvesper, 2002),  
28 thereby corroborating arguments made in the football management literature (see, e.g.,  
29 Brown *et al.*, 2010; Morrow, 2003) that "*football is firmly rooted in the local setting and*  
30 *plays a vital part of the cultural and social make-up of local communities*" (Dolles and  
31 Söderman, 2013, p. 384). Consequently, an examination of (strategic) decision-making  
32 regarding CSR would be inadequate if it overlooked either these socio-cultural ties (Hamil  
33 and Morrow, 2011) or the surrounding context of social groups, interests and resources  
34 (Wittington, 2001). Rather, an account of this 'social system' in which managerial decision  
35 making occurs is necessary.  
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49 According to Mellor (2005), the reputation of football declined during the mid-1980s  
50 because of social problems such as serious hooliganism that demanded state intervention. In  
51 addition to increased political pressure from central governments for necessary actions,  
52 shifting economic and social circumstances combined with the influence of television have  
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created an environment in which football's 'power' became a catalyst for social change (Taylor, 2004).

More specifically, the socio-economic changes in the UK during the past 30 years (such as the decline of the UK's manufacturing base, migration away from inner cities and changes in most citizens' cultural and social activities) have determined to a large degree communities and foundation managers' outreach to them. Thus, detachment of these decision-makers from their social systems is practically impossible. The following extracts highlight this shift:

We are also in a city here – probably the first in England – that will be an ethnic majority city, as the ethnic breakdown is particularly that Southeast Asian Muslim population, which traditionally are not watchers of football or participants in football. There are Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indians in the city, and that's increasing rapidly. Now, football isn't the number one sport in those countries, and our job is to try and make sure that the children in this country are playing football and continue to play football. And then eventually when they become adults, you hope they will actually become football fans and buy tickets or shirts of [the club] (PL-fc1a).

The football club is very, very different now than it was in 1994, but so is the community that we serve. [The city] has become vastly diverse. I think we have something like 82 different nationalities within the city, which presents a massive – not problem because problem is not the right word. But in terms of a community office being equitable and creating access, it comes with its own problem, but a challenging problem [...] that we are really enthused and supposed to be tackling (FLC-fc4).

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5 Television also has had an important role in the formation of the social context of  
6  
7 CSR. King (2002) noted that the 1992 BSkyB contract was a crucial moment in the  
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9 transformation of top level of English professional football because “*it linked the game to*  
10  
11 *Thatcherite developments*” (p. 117). The “*Sky-ification*” of football, as Taylor (2004, p. 50)  
12  
13 called it, also had a great effect on the understanding of community. Fans no longer need to  
14  
15 live close to their team’s base or attend matches in order to feel ‘part of the club’ (ibid.).  
16  
17 These ‘fan communities’ require different treatment than the more traditional football  
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19 supporters. Television obviously has been a crucial influence on this development, and is key  
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21 to addressing it; consequently, football clubs now depend heavily on television revenues.  
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25 According to Taylor (2004), the community dispersion and television are the principal  
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27 factors in the external pressure on football clubs to reconsider and re-establish relations with  
28  
29 their communities. At a moment of particularly drastic and rapid transformation within  
30  
31 English football, New Labour won a landslide election in the UK. Under the ideological  
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33 principle of the ‘Third Way’, the party introduced a number of welfare and public policy  
34  
35 reforms aimed at creating a strong sense of responsibility across society. Hine and Preuss  
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37 (2009) wrote that in the wake of the economic liberalisation of the 1980s and 1990s, New  
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39 Labour had to perform a balancing act between the values of their traditional constituencies  
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41 and the need to be seen as pro- (or at least not anti-) business. Wilson (2000, cited in Hine &  
42  
43 Preuss, 2009) noted that striking this balance prompted the government to avoid the heavy-  
44  
45 handed regulation characteristic of previous Labour administrations and to appeal to the logic  
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47 of the market and fair competition as methods of ‘regulating’ activity.  
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51 Therefore, the rationales underlying CSR in English football seem to be what  
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53 systemic theorists call “*peculiar to particular social contexts*” (Wittington, 2001, p. 26).  
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55 Indeed, the differences between national social systems emphasised in the systemic  
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perspective are empirically apparent in CSR in football (e.g., Hovemann *et al.*, 2011; Walters and Tacon, 2011) with different levels of commitment and diverse activities found among European football leagues.

This contextual background encapsulates the ‘set of conditions’ (see *harmonising*) under which managerial decision-making in charitable foundations occurs, which underscores the systemic theorists’ crucial point that decision-makers are profoundly rooted in thickly interwoven social systems, such as the football club’s history, local social needs and so forth. For example, one participant said:

We are talking about the club here, so you have people who have been here for a long time and have built up an ethos, philosophy [...] This allows you, this gives you wings to go out and do things [...] So I walk in the footsteps of legends and I am looking after that while I am here [...] My job here is [...] working at the roots where the club has been (PL-fc4).

The relevance that the systemic perspective has to the emerging theory of assessable transcendence is found in the “*play-by-the-local-rules*” proposition (Whittington, 2001, p. 10), and the recognition that not all companies are perfect profit-maximisers. The systemic perspective’s relevance also is manifested in the fact that CSR decisions are highly influenced by the leagues, which provide much of the funding. In this respect, the process is less an emergent one than the evolutionary and processual strategies advocate, although foundation managers often use a trial-and-error process lacking an orderly sequence of steps to initiate a CSR programme. Foundation managers align their decisions to a specific CSR landscape within which – at least for three to five years – to strategize as deliberately as possible.

## Concluding notes

### *Strategic decision-making in charitable foundations: toward paradigm pluralism?*

Our intention in this paper was to use a context-specific study to illustrate the efficacy of using a multi-paradigm perspective to examine the strategic decision-making processes of charitable foundation managers, encountered through the meanings the managers themselves attached to those processes. Specifically, the decision-making strategies adopted by English football clubs through their charitable foundations seem to align with all but one of the four quadrants of Whittington's (2001) framework (see Table 1).

TAKE IN TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

For example, managers' micro-social process of *harmonising*, in its reliance on relatively rational planning, displays elements of the systemic perspective, although the process is profoundly interwoven in the local context and greatly influenced by the socio-economic, political environment and the parent company's playing status. On the other hand, *safeguarding* displays characteristics associated with the evolutionary approach, which defines profit maximisation (in both business and charity terms) as the natural outcome of strategy making. From this perspective, a more emergent process, dependent on environmental forces (such as commercial businesses' increased interest in CSR), seems to be at play, which ensures organisational survival, over the short term for the foundations and the long term for the parent football clubs (i.e. 'idealistic commercialism' as per Cortsen (2014). Strategic decision-making from an evolutionary and systemic perspective may lead to *transcending*, yet the latter largely depends on foundation managers' effective communication skills. *Manoeuvring*, then, could be viewed from the processual perspective,

which proposes that the objectives and practices of strategy depend on the ‘compromising’ and ‘learning’ processes that may lead in different directions from those initially planned (through *harmonising* and *safeguarding*).

To reiterate, clear boundaries do not exist between Wittington’s (2001) proposed generic perspectives on strategy. On the contrary, this study indicates a great deal of overlap within these perspectives, and corroborates Henderson and Zvesper’s (2002) argument that conflicting paradigms should be celebrated rather than viewed as signs of theoretical immaturity. Multi-paradigm approaches can potentially reveal insights into the ‘mechanics’ of managerial decision-making that are not easily discernable from a mono-paradigmatic perspective. They also offer more comprehensive accounts of organisation reality and therefore are arguably more accurate of the multifaceted nature of organisations (Gioa and Pitre, 1990). Thus, we demonstrate that strategic decision making and CSR implementation do not follow one process or another. Rather there are multiple processes that have potential to engage actors, depending on the local contextual forces and relationship between the paradoxical pressures from differing views on the objective of implementing CSR within the organisation.

This empirical exploratory paper is a further step towards understanding strategic decision-making in non-profit sports organisations, particularly charitable foundations. Of course, caution is required given the study’s contextual parameters and exploratory approach. Despite these limitations, this study offers empirical support for the way in which strategic decisions are made by those who ‘make things happen’ for business and social objectives alike. The charitable foundations context that our data represents is paradoxical and therefore particularly suited to examination using a multi-paradigm approach (Clarke-Hill *et al.*, 2003).

To this end, the application of Wittington’s framework towards decision-making processes in the context of professional team sport organisations in general, and their CSR

delivery mechanisms in particular, illustrates that organisational reality can consist of multiple realities and this offers opportunities for further research. For example, more detailed comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between manager's decision making processes may lead to deeper understanding of the process of CSR implementation. Furthermore, taking contextual variables into account and the development of decision making practices over time may provide more dynamic accounts of the process of CSR strategy creation and implementation. There is also opportunity to conduct comparative multi-paradigm analysis to contribute to the extensive debate on 'paradigm wars' as articulated by Shepherd and Challenger (2013). Finally, comprehensive (and alternative to this study) methodological paradigms such as Critical Realism (see Byers *et al.*, 2015) may provide insight into the relationship between structures and agents in shaping the multiple realities that are evident through our illustration of Whittington's framework and crucially provide explanation as to why the processes of strategic decision making are so complex, dynamic and contextually bounded. From a more practical point of view, by empirically illustrating that a more multi-paradigmatic perspective is at play when managing the broad notion of CSR in professional team organisations, further research of this context, and the paradoxical nature of managers decision making, could explore the challenges that these organisational actors face in formulating and implementing strategy and CSR objectives of their parent companies. It would be useful to parent companies to be informed of how to successfully negotiate these challenges and support CSR work to meet multiple actor's objectives.

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
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**Table 1:** ‘Assessable transcendence’ in relation to strategy perspectives (modified by Whittington, 2001, p. 39)

	<b>Classic</b>	<b>Processual</b>	<b>Evolutionary</b>	<b>Systemic</b>
<i>Strategy</i>	Formal	Crafted	Efficient	Embedded
<i>Rationale</i>	Profit maximisation	Vague	Survival	Local
<i>Focus</i>	Internal (plans)	Internal (politics/cognitions)	External (markets)	External (societies)
<i>Processes</i>	Analytical	Bargaining/learning	Darwinian	Social
<i>Key influences</i>	Economics/military	Psychology	Economics/biology	Sociology
<i>Key authors</i>	Chandler; Ansoff; Porter	Cyert & March; Mintzberg; Pettigrew	Hannan & Freeman; Williamson	Granovetter; Whitley
<i>Emergence</i>	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s
<i>In this study</i>	Inapplicable?	Manoeuvring (communication) 	Safeguarding (business performance)	Harmonising (social performance)
			<i>Transcending</i>	

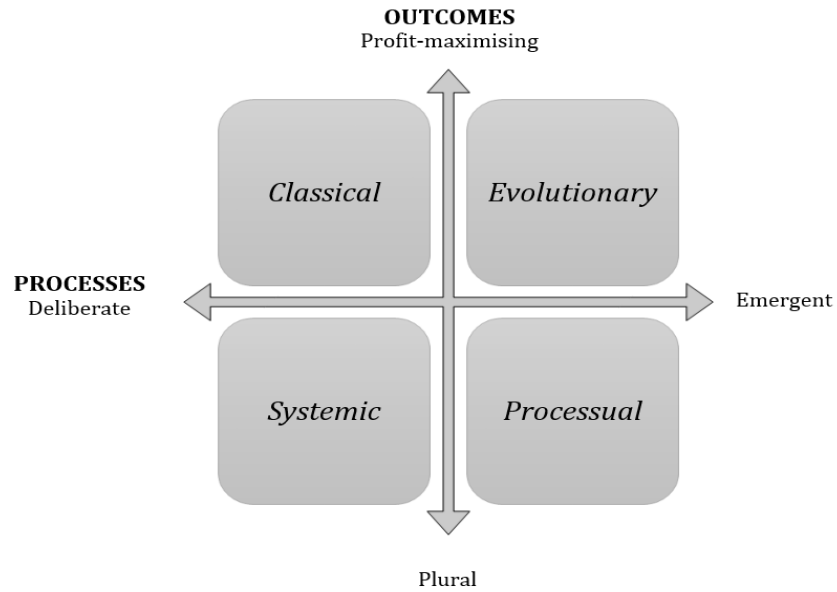


Figure 1: Generic perspectives on strategy (Whittington, 2001, p. 3)

Figure 2: ‘Assessable transcendence’ (modified by Anagnostopoulos *et al.*, 2014)

