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ORIGINAL PAPER

Responsible Management-as-Process of Smoothing–Striating: Transcending Freedom *or* Control Contingencies

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Abstract

Enactment of responsible management (RM) can be fostered by giving actors discretionary freedom to act responsibly and/or by controlling them to act responsibly. RM research has dominantly taken a contingency approach that focuses on conditions under which actors should choose either freedom or control. However, this approach does not offer insights into entangled freedom and control dynamics and is a poor fit for the inherently processual RM phenomenon. We propose a paradox process alternative, mobilizing the lens of smoothing–striating dynamics, which we apply to the Becoming Responsible Initiative (BRI) case. Smoothing fosters creativity, discretion, and lines of flight. It is dynamically entangled with striating, which fosters standardization, strictures, and the direction of enactment. We present a rhizomatic process model based on a thematic template analysis of 104 interviews, observations over 30 months, and documentary evidence. The model explains how a tension spring of over/under smoothing–striating drives RM enactment in four modes: pervasive smoothing, selective smoothing, rigid striating, and flexible striating. Each mode involves dynamics between smoothing–striating unfolding in distributed RM encounters. We contribute to the RM literature by presenting a framework explaining the paradoxical-processual dynamics of RM enactment. Our framework also transcends the freedom or control contingency approach, and adds an intricate methodology for processual analysis to the paradox discussion.

Keywords Responsible management · Freedom and control versus smoothing–striating · Paradox process

Enacting responsible management (RM) has been identified as an important lever to address the socio-environmental challenges of our times. For instance, enacting RM is crucial for socially responsible human resource management (Shen & Benson, 2016), responsible human rights management in the supply chain (Schüßler et al., 2022), RM of AI (Lindebaum & Fleming, 2023), and climate-responsible management (Biancalani & Avagyan, 2014).

The following quote from our empirical research site highlights a common and important challenge for enabling the enactment of RM, namely navigating often contradicting prescriptions from freedom-based and control-based approaches.

> We have a *command and control culture*. We do things from the centre, and we issue edicts…and say, this week we are going to be doing [responsibility]… to tackle obesity… I want you to *free up some of your people* to take them off checkouts or off stock control to actually do something community orientated. [Jay, Corporate Affairs at Aditi]

Two key questions often emerge in response to this challenge: How can we allow everyone to "do their own responsible thing", and in their own way? and How can we control people and organizations to ensure that RM is enacted in line with organizational and societal preferences? The quote also highlights the paradoxical nature of freedom and control.

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Although freedom and control are commonly understood as opposites, generative dynamics also seem to be at play. Paradoxically, the "control culture" that demands "doing responsibility" leads to "freeing up" people to enact RM.

Fostering freedom to enable discretionary RM enactment (Demacarty, 2009; Dierksmeier, 2011; Freeman & Phillips, 2002; Zhao et al., 2023) or control to ensure a particular type of RM enactment (Durden, 2008; Hansen & Schaltegger, 2018; Hilliard, 2013; Waddock & Bodwell, 2004). On their own, each approach intuitively makes sense. Taken together, however, it seems contradictory to foster freedom for discretionary RM while also exerting control to ensure a particular type of RM enactment. Accordingly, joining the two approaches produces varieties of tensions (Caspari et al., 2018; Lewis & Smith, 2014; Morawetz, 1985; Tzuo, 2007). These characteristics make freedom *or* control approaches to fostering RM enactment a perfect example of a paradox, "contradictory yet interrelated elements—elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (Lewis, 2000, p. 760).

The common response to paradoxical tensions is a contingency approach where, depending on the environmental conditions, managers choose either one or the other (Lewis & Smith, 2014). For instance, Dierksmeier (2011) argues that management should choose freedom if the situation demands a variety of qualitative RM success criteria and Durden (2008) argues that management should choose control if the situation demands an explicit quantifiable performance measurement. We use the term freedom *or* control to express this contingency approach that separates freedom and control-based approaches to foster RM enactment.

We build our research question based on the problematization (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011) that this freedom *or* control approach is limited in its insight potential for RM studies in two ways. First, it limits insights into the type of generative entangled freedom *and* control dynamics as demonstrated in the introductory quote. Second, the ontology of freedom *or* control as discrete binary entities is a poor fit for RM as a processual phenomenon (Langley, 2021). New insights can be gained through an ontological shift to RM-as-process (Thompson, 2011). We therefore pursue the following research question:

> How can we better understand the processual dynamics that underlie the enactment of responsible management, by transcending the freedom or control contingency approach?

We propose smoothing–striating (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) as an alternative lens, to transcend the dominant freedom *or* control contingency approach. Smoothing–striating embraces the paradox by accepting and harnessing the tensions it generates as inherent and persistent forces of organizational existence (Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Tracey, 2016), and by exploring the internal dynamics between *both* elements in a processual way (Schad et al., 2016).

Smoothing–striating describes processes in which spaces of enactment are shaped through the entangled dynamics *between* smoothing forces, which foster enactment characterized by creativity, discretionary enactment and lines of flight, *and* striating forces, which foster standardization, strictures, and the direction of enactment (Aroles & McLean, 2021; Moe, 2019; Munro & Jordan, 2013; Pelach, 2018). Importantly, this approach embraces the paradox as smoothing–striating are dynamically entangled, "only discovered in a mixed form" (Somers-Hall, 2018, p. 242). We use the term *smoothing–striating* to capture these smoothing *and* striating dynamics when fostering RM enactment.

We first situate our study within the RM literature related to freedom and control. We then introduce the conceptual lens of smoothing–striating and the RM-as-process perspective. We then outline the methodology that underlies our in-depth case study and thematic analysis. Next, we show how tensions and the adoption of RM modes played out through eight smoothing–striating encounters in our case. We proceed to discuss these findings in light of the theoretical insights from the literature to build a rhizomatic process model of RM enactment. We contribute a novel framework to the RM literature by capturing the complex processual dynamics of RM enactment. To the freedom and control discussion, we offer smoothing–striating as an alternative paradox methodology. To the paradox literature, we provide an intricate methodology to analyse tensions from a variety of organizational paradoxes.

From Freedom *or* Control Contingencies to Smoothing *and* Striating Dynamics

Terms akin to freedom and control, respectively, smoothing and striating, have been highlighted in the paradox literature since its early beginnings (De Vaujany et al., 2021; Lewis, 2000). For instance, Lewis and Smith (2014, p. 127) use flexibility versus control in their popular introduction of tensions arising from paradox:

> Organizations are rife with tensions—flexibility versus control… Researchers have long responded using contingency theory, asking "Under what conditions should managers emphasize either A or B?" Yet increasingly studies apply a paradox perspective, shifting the question to "How can we engage both A and B simultaneously?"

We mobilize the paradox lens as a metatheory (Lewis & Smith, 2014; Schad et al., 2016) that conceptually connects freedom *or* control contingency approaches with smoothing and striating dynamics approaches in our study. We move

from the lens of freedom *or* control, as discrete and independent entities, to examining how the conceptual framing of smoothing and striating (DeLanda, 1998; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) may be mobilized to offer novel insights into the complex dynamics of paradoxical tensions in RM (Carollo & Guerci, 2017; Hahn et al., 2014; Laasch et al., 2020b; Moosmayer et al., 2019; Van der Byl et al., 2020). As summarized in Table 1, this shift allows us to approach tensions connected to RM enactment in a way that embraces their paradoxical and dynamically entangled smoothing *and* striating. This contrasts to attempts to artificially separate freedom *or* control entities, pitching them against each other.

Following the logic in Table 1, we first discuss what we have learnt from the dominant contingency approach of freedom *or* control, to then move on to position a smoothing *and* striating dynamics study of RM.

Freedom *or* Control Contingency Approach

Freedom and control have emerged as core themes in the RM literature. These approaches are driven by two main arguments. One argument suggests giving managers more freedom to enable managers to enact RM in discretionary ways. The other is centred on controls to ensure that managers act responsibly and do so in a particular way. Both approaches have strong arguments for their potential to foster RM enactment as well as critical counter-arguments outlining their limitations. Their paradoxical nature also generates tensions. The freedom/control literature dominantly addresses tensions through a contingency approach (Lewis & Smith, 2014; Smith & Lewis, 2011) that offers discrete recommendations under what conditions to choose which one: freedom *or* control.

For instance, freedom *or* control is a choice implied by those who focus on "freedom and its limits" through control (Horvath, 1995, p. 329). Following this argument, one limits the other, existing in a mutually substituting either-or relationship, on "a 'continuum' between self-control [freedom] and external control" (Krüger, 2023, p. 78). This emphasis of either freedom *or* control maps onto the published RM research, strongly advocating for freedom-based RM (e.g. Demacarty, 2009; Dierksmeier, 2011) or control-base RM enactment (e.g. Durden, 2008; Waddock & Bodwell, 2004) under certain conditions. For instance, Zhao et al. (2023) found that if the aim is to facilitate the enactment of employees' moral voice, autonomous free motivation is effective, but not controlled motivation. Hilliard (2013), on the other hand, explains that if the goal is to increase socio-economic performance, RM centred on control-based incentivization of responsible behaviours is more effective than freedom-based incentivization. We now briefly introduce the arguments and contingencies for why and when managers should choose freedom-based or control-based RM enactment.

Freedom-Based Responsible Management

Freedom-based RM enactment revolves around the central role freedom plays in becoming a responsible leader (Loacker & Muhr, 2009). It often manifests as an invitation to enact RM, while barriers impeding responsibility are removed, and support is provided for discretionary RM enactment (Carroll, 1991; Coldwell, 2010; Demacarty, 2009; Dierksmeier, 2011; Dierksmeier & Laasch, 2021; Freeman & Phillips, 2002; Koehn, 2017; Zhao et al., 2023).

Scholars promoting discretionary freedom emphasize the need for a "freedom-responsibility nexus" (Dierksmeier, 2011, p. 263) in which managers are free from the pressure to act irresponsibly and are empowered to act responsibly out of their own will. It stresses the need to free up managers if their RM enactment is limited by pressure to comply with irresponsible prescriptions from mainstream management thought (Moosmayer et al., 2019; Painter-Morland, 2015). Some argue that freedom can be created by unlearning taken-for-granted irresponsible management (Padan & Nguyen, 2020) or through democratic, non-hierarchical responsible decision processes (Verkerk et al., 2001). Advocates of freedom-based RM build their normative, humanistic argument on an emphasis of human self-determination to counteract the instrumentalization of human beings, and

Table 1 Freedom *or* control versus smoothing–striating approaches

	Freedom *or* control contingency approach	Smoothing *and* striating dynamics approach
Guiding question	Under what conditions choose either freedom or control for better outcomes?	How to generatively engage in smoothing and striating simultaneously?
Position towards tensions	Freedom/control tensions are discrete problems to be solved in order to achieve RM enactment	Smoothing–striating continuously generates tensions that both challenge and fuel suitable RM enactment
Core premise	Discrete choice: Alignment of decisions with tension contingencies leads to more systematic RM enactment	Dynamic coexistence: Embracing and engaging tensions generates suitable RM enactment
RM response	Identify the conditions under which either freedom or control is to be chosen!	Engage in a mode of RM that fosters generative smoothing–striating dynamics!

References Adapted from Lewis and Smith (2014)

human beings' innate drive towards responsible behaviour (Melé, 2013, 2014; Pirson & Turnbull, 2011).

From a freedom perspective, some scholars claim that enacting RM is only possible when individuals have the discretionary freedom or choice to select between responsible and irresponsible actions, and they have the freedom to do otherwise (Fischer, 1982; Mele, 2010). This discretion also leads to a key criticism of certain types of freedom-based approaches: more freedom will not necessarily lead to more responsibility. For example, Dierksmeier (2018) contends that this approach can lead to a lack of directed enactment and that some freedoms can be abused by allowing management to engage in irresponsible enactment.

Control-Based Responsible Management

Control-based RM is linked to the managerialist control paradigm (Billsberry et al., 2023), applying restrictive and enabling control mechanisms to prevent irresponsible management and/or to ensure a particular type of RM enactment (Martin et al., 2009; Stansbury & Barry, 2007). Instrumental strategic alignment arguments have also been presented: How can the right type of responsibility be enacted for the sake of the corporation and its stakeholders (Grayson, 2011; Hilliard, 2013; Waddock & Bodwell, 2004)? In control-based RM, emphasis is placed on measuring, formalizing, and incentivizing particular RM behaviours (Hilliard, 2013).

Control-based RM enactment relies on highly structured programmes, key performance indicators, balanced scorecards, responsibility management systems, and tightly defined policies, routines, and regulations (Durden, 2008; Hansen & Schaltegger, 2018; Hilliard, 2013; Waddock & Bodwell, 2004). It has given rise to management control systems centred on socially responsible behaviour (Durden, 2008). For instance, organizations have implemented "total responsibility management" systems (Waddock & Bodwell, 2002, p. 113) that rely on codified instructions in the form of a manual (Waddock & Bodwell, 2017).

However, others argue that control-based RM enactment may lead to a variety of "perverse unintended consequences" (Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018, p. 696), such as managers gaming controls, information manipulation, selective attention, illusion of control, and damage of stakeholder relationships. Control-based RM can be overly rigid, restrictive, and unable to adjust to different conditions (Carr, 1992; Malmi et al., 2023). Control also requires enforcement of managers who are controlled against their nature or will. As a result, they may break out of the control, which could lead to adverse effects (Russell, 2019). Similarly, managers subjected to strict control in one space may be prompted to act with more discretion in other less restricted spaces, making the intended control system ineffective (Peteraf & Reed, 2007). Excessive control may also enable the unquestioned spreading of harmful ideologies (Le Corre & Burger-Helmchen, 2021).

In summary, there is a variety of contingencies related to both arguments for and against freedom-based and control-based approaches to RM. In this study, we seek to transcend the interpretation of the dominant literature emphasis on choosing between freedom *or* control, depending on contingencies. Instead, we study how the paradoxical elements of smoothing–striating are dynamically entangled in RM enactment processes.

Smoothing and Striating Dynamics Approach

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), striation takes the form of highly codified forms of space with strict rules and grid-like imagery. In contrast, smooth spaces are defined by their sheer openness, expressiveness, and potential to resist and subvert codifying processes through new lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). While striating seeks to map out, control, and limit space, smoothing has the potential to freely create or facilitate innovative and radical changes that resist planification and predictability.

Freedom cannot simply be equated with smoothing, and control cannot be equated with striating. This simplistic parallel view fails to grasp the complexity of these dynamics. For example, striating can also open spaces for free enactment, and control can emerge from smoothing forces. Therefore, it is essential to explore beyond apparently stabilized outcomes and examine the complex dynamics that underlie the enactment of RM. While striating and smoothing do not directly correlate with the concepts of freedom and control, they can help us to rethink how to engage with similar dynamics.

Smoothing–Striating Dynamics

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of smoothing and striating transcend the freedom *or* control contingency approach, as smoothing and striating exist in dynamic entanglement; they are never enacted in isolation (Somers-Hall, 2018). This understanding mirrors the paradox literature's both-and thinking that embraces paradox elements' dynamic entanglement (Schad et al., 2016; Smith & Lewis, 2022). Dynamics of smoothing and striating opens and closes RM enactment spaces in reaction to the forces involved.

The processes of deterritorialization and subsequent reterritorialization are central to understanding the subtle ways through which smoothing and striating forces operate in dynamic entanglement. Deterritorialization is "a transversal process that defines the creativity of an assemblage: a nonlinear and nonfiliative system of relation" (Parr, 2010, p. 71). Deterritorialization dissolves established codes and practices, thus making room for novelty, creativity, and new

lines of flight to enact RM with discretion. Reterritorialization, on the other hand, ensures that new codes and practices become inscribed within these new spaces (Hillier, 2005). For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), smoothing is associated with the process of deterritorialization (Hillier & Tzortzi, 2006; Hjorth, 2011; Painter-Morland, 2011; Välikangas & Carlsen, 2019), while striating is closely linked to the process of reterritorialization.

Accordingly, striating seeks to direct and regulate outcomes by centring on particular forms of enactment of RM and a process of re/territorialization of spaces of enactment. Examples connected to striating include the introduction of RM performance indicators, scorecards, or narrowing the scope of RM that may be enacted. By closing spaces for one form of RM enactment, these processes may also open spaces for another type of RM enactment. In contrast, smoothing seeks to encourage new lines of flights through discretionary enactment and deterritorialization. For example, placing social responsibility above competing commercial goals in a space realizes smoothing through the deterritorialization of the commercial space and the generation of new spaces for enacting RM. This process requires dynamics between striating and smoothing to achieve this aim (such as reterritorialization through specific striations).

Forces and Tensions

For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), neither smoothing nor striating are more preferable than the other, as an excessive or insufficient degree of either can lead to problematic tensions. On the one hand, the overabundance of smoothing forces may lead to chaos and suicidal tendencies, with RM failing to be enacted in a coherent manner. On the other hand, over-striating forces can stifle opportunities, prevent creativity, and limit the ability to adjust in a particular situation. Managing such tensions requires generating a balance between smoothing and striating (McLean & Aroles, 2016), which is similar to Smith and Lewis's (2011) general equilibrium tactic for navigating organizational paradoxes.

Going beyond smooth and striated spaces as artificially stabilised objects of inquiry, Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 500) argue that one must explore how "the forces at work" within a space continually striate it, and how this develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces. This concept connects neatly to the continuous nature of tensions generated by organizational paradoxes (Lewis & Smith, 2014). Taking these insights from paradox and smoothing–striating theory together, we arrive at an appreciation of the role of smoothing–striating forces and tensions that continuously shape and drive processes of RM enactment.

The conceptual imagery around smoothing–striating has been explored in various empirical contexts and disciplinary settings, such as learning spaces (Bayne, 2004), the making of scientific knowledge (Aroles & McLean, 2021), and the workings of strategy (Munro & Thanem, 2018). These articles demonstrate the insightfulness of smoothing–striating by exploring the tempestuous relations between structure and agency, novelty and persistence, change and stability, and freedom and control. We contend that further empirical work is needed to delve deeper into the tensions between and dynamics of smoothing–striating. In this paper, we explore empirically the smoothing–striating dynamics and tensions underlying RM enactment processes. We now briefly present our RM-as-process perspective to study smoothing–striating dynamics in RM enactment.

Responsible Management-as-Process of Becoming Responsible

Paradoxical tensions in RM, like those related to smoothing–striating, are best studied as dynamics that unfold in RM processes (Laasch et al., 2020b; Van der Byl et al., 2020). A shift to RM-as-process requires rethinking responsibility as an attribute of certain entities (e.g. managers, corporations, reified practices), towards a distributed process of becoming (e.g. Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Painter-Morland, 2011).

As a phenomenon, RM is inherently processual. It is the process of addressing ethics, responsibility, and sustainability in, through, and throughout management enactment (Forray & Leigh, 2012; Laasch & Conaway, 2015; Rasche & Gilbert, 2015). Laasch et al. (2020b) argue that RM-as-process captures the naturally distributed but interconnected nature of RM enactment that spans RM encounters across distinct spaces, times, and managerial roles and professions. Studying RM-as-process, therefore, implies examining responsibility as "the product of distributed, expansive processes, associations and encounters" (Gherardi & Laasch, 2022, p. 1). In other words, RM enactment is continuously reproduced through distributed and interrelated response-able encounters of different actors (Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Laasch et al., 2023; Loacker & Muhr, 2009) across space and time (Jones et al., 2004).

RM-as-process connects to moves in the responsibility literature away from positivist, entity-centred studies (Basu & Palazzo, 2008), which distinguishes our approach from three salient entity-based streams of RM literature, as summarized in Table 2. The three streams include (1) managers as entities (Bowen, 1953; Crilly et al., 2008; Prahalad, 2010; Schneider et al., 2010) and their ir/responsible roles and behaviours (Painter-Morland, 2011); (2) corporations as entities (Carroll & Laasch, 2020; Choi & Park, 2014; Verkerk et al., 2001) and their social performance (Waddock & Bodwell, 2004); and (3) management practices as entities (Shove et al., 2012) with ir/responsible characteristics

Table 2 Streams of responsible management research

	Entity-centred study of responsible management (RM)			RM-as-process
	RM by managers	RM of corporations	RM practices	
Main unit of analysis	The manager as a RM *actor*	The organization as an *object* of RM	The *subject* of specific RM practices	How responsible management evolves over time and through space
Definition of RM	RM is a responsible manager's behaviour	RM is a responsible organization's activity	RM is responsible practices	RM is a process of interconnected responsible encounters
Responsibility as……	…an attribute of managers: Responsible managerial behaviour	…an attribute of organizations: Corporate social performance	…an attribute of a particular practice: Responsible practices	…continuously emerging from a process: Responsible effects
Forces driving and shaping the stream	Professionalization of management debate in parallel with the historic legitimization of the business school	The rise of the corporation as a new societal institution, and the UN Global Compact	Need for a granular, in-depth understanding of a variety of practices and practicing and the resulting impacts	Need for an interconnected understanding of the continuous becoming of responsible management throughout time and space(s)
Exemplary publications	– "The responsible manager" (Prahalad, 2010, p. 36) – "Responsible behavior in managers" (Schneider et al., 2010, p. 21); – "Social responsibilities of the businessman" (Bowen, 1953) – "Management's responsibilities" (Abrams, 1951, p. 29)	– RM as "an organization's CSR" (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 57) – RM "aims to achieve sustainable business" (Laasch & Conaway, 2016, p. 401) – RM as "social responsibility of organizations" (Verkerk et al., 2001, p. 353)	– Socially responsible human resource management practices (Shen & Benson, 2016) – Moral reflexive RM practice (Hibbert & Cunliffe, 2015) – RM is enacted in constellations of transdisciplinary practices (Laasch et al., 2020a)	– Responsible *managing* as a verb emphasizing the natural match of the RM phenomenon for a processual study (de Souza Bispo, 2022; Laasch et al., 2020b; Price et al., 2020) – RM as a relational process of emergence involving humans and organizations, among others (Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Painter-Morland, 2011)
Conceptual grounding → Reference discipline	– Responsible leadership, behavioural ethics, micro-CSR → Organizational behaviour, psychology of work	– Corporate social responsibility/sustainability → Organizational studies of the corporation and the business and society field	– Often descriptive-empirical with little conceptual grounding, and without shared conceptual reference points → Sociological study of managerial work practices	– Studies of practicing, process and time in the organization and management → Processual sociology and ontology

(Palazzo & Wentland, 2011; Petrick, 2011; Shen & Benson, 2016).

In contrast to these established entity approaches, RM-as-process provides novel insights into RM enactment. Drawing from the process study of organizational change (Chia, 2002; Langley, 1999; Reinecke & Ansari, 2017), we examine RM as continuously *becoming*, rather than something that *is* (Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). This shift transcends the emphasis in the literature on discrete, pre-existing, reified, responsible entities, in favour of a processual understanding of RM, as continuously emerging.

RM-as-process focuses our attention on the continuous and simultaneous enactment and achievement of responsibility (Laasch et al., 2020b; Loacker & Muhr, 2009; Pérezts et al., 2011; Price et al., 2020). Instead of examining the ir/responsible, free/controlled attributes of discrete pre-existing entities, we begin to unpack how entities not just out there. Instead, entities instead are continuously re/produced, and made ir/responsible through situated smoothing–striating processes, which is the processual accomplishment of RM enactment (de Souza Bispo, 2022; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Price et al., 2020). This process involves unpacking the continuous un/making of transient entities of responsible managers, corporations, and practices through a smoothing–striating process conceptualized as RM-as-Process of continuously becoming responsible.

Methods

Case Context

Our research was conducted in a global retail company based in the UK, for which we use the alias, Aditi. Aditi was purposively selected for an in-depth case study (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Yin, 2003) due to its unusually high intensity of RM enactment. Aditi has progressively been a leader in pioneering large-scale RM initiatives. Following extensive consultation with stakeholders and internal analysis, Aditi developed the Becoming Responsible Initiative (BRI) which provided the case boundary for our research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2003). RM in the context of a large-scale responsibility programme (Pirsch et al., 2007; Tetrault-Sirsly & Lamertz, 2007) like Aditi's BRI is a particularly pronounced case of distributed RM enactment, given the embedding of RM across sites and employee groups (Chong, 2009; Grayson, 2011; Rake & Grayson, 2009; Rodrigo & Arenas, 2008).

BRI had increasingly become a key aspect underlying a variety of managerial processes across Aditi. The implementation of such RM programmes has been described as 'becoming'; an entwined process in which programmes and organizations are continuously shaped and reshaped (McShane & Cunningham, 2012; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). Accordingly, this case closely matches our research interest and conceptual frame.

Data Collection

Data collection unfolded over 30 months, including periods of on-site immersion, of focussed interview series, and of off-site follow-up for secondary data collection. In line with our interest in the processes and encounters underlying the enactment of responsible management in practice, we decided to opt for an ethnographic style of enquiry. This allowed us to closely examine the making and assembling of responsible management and thus paved the way for a granular analysis of the ways in which individuals interact, outcomes materialise, and relations shape up (Wacquant, 2005; Ybema et al., 2009). Ethnography granted us a privileged access point to those processes and encounters underlying responsible management and allowed us to take issue.

> "with managerial claims, with worker accounts, with received wisdom, with elegant models, or with highly generalized concepts that say little (but assume much) about what particular people are doing in their work-a-day life or how things really do get done (or not done) on the ground" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 229).

Data sources included in-depth interviews, observations, and a wide array of documentary evidence. The research entailed an 11-week period, during which the corresponding author was fully immersed in Aditi's corporate responsibility (CR) team. He was assigned a fixed desk located in the open floorplan office of the Public Affairs Department. The department was an ideal centralized place for initial observation, with an arms-length connection to C-suite leadership, its hub-like role for business units, and its interfacing function to external stakeholders.

Qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted with employees and managers connected to the BRI, both inside and outside Aditi (e.g. suppliers, customers, advisers). Questions in the interviews revolved around interviewees' roles, their BRI-related RM enactment, and how that enactment related to a larger BRI process (see interview guide in the Appendix for further detail). This interview design allowed us to explore different facets of RM as enacted, experienced, and understood by interviewees. Between May 2013 and June 2015, we formally interviewed 72 individuals from eleven different groups. Some individuals were interviewed multiple times, adding up to 104 interviews (see Table 3). Interview length ranged from 20 to 90 min, with an average duration of 41 min. Interviews mostly took place in-person in situ where RM was enacted, but in eleven cases, they had to be conducted via telephone (e.g. managers abroad). All interviews were recorded with permission from participants and transcribed. Interviewing was suspended

Table 3 Interview sample

Groups	Interviewee group's relationship to BRI	People interviewed	Interviews[a]
CR Team	BRI ambassadors, enabling others	14	48
CR Liaison	CR managers working on BRI as a full-time job across commercial business departments	11	10
Corporate Affairs	BRI as part of their public engagement	5	5
Customer Relations	Involved in communicating with customers about BRI cares	7	6
Commercial Support	Commercial subject-topic specialists related to BRI cares	6	6
Infrastructure Team	Enacted most of the initiatives related to the *Environmental Impact care*	7	6
Human Resources	*Opportunities for the Young* and *Employee Welfare* cares related to the human resources function	5	5
Product Team	Product teams in charge of product design (*Healthy Eating)* and (*responsible) Procurement*	5	5
In Shop	Employees in the shops enacted the care of *Community Engagement*	4	4
Subsidiary Company	Managers in international subsidiaries and branded business units enacted own responsibility activities aligned with BRI	5	6
Supplier Company	Suppliers were expected to engage in activities aligned with Becoming Responsible	3	3
		∑72 people interviewed	∑104 interviews

[a]Occasionally interviews were attended by two people, leading to a greater number of people interviewed than the number of interviews conducted in some groups (e.g. Infrastructure Team)

Some people were interviewed multiple times, leading to a smaller number of people interviewed than the number of interviews conducted in some groups (e.g. CR Team)

when data saturation was reached (Guest et al., 2006; Hennink et al., 2017).

The researcher was given full access to Aditi, enabling him to roam the business and spend time at sites throughout Aditi (e.g. supplier hub, e-retail headquarters, international trading centre, retail stores). He also shadowed managers involved in the BRI, accompanying them to several meetings and presentations. The trajectory of this roaming was guided by actor-network theory method guidance to follow the actor (Cressman, 2009; Latour, 1987). In particular, the BRI initiative was treated as a nonhuman actor. We were guided by following the controversies (Latour, 2007; Venturini, 2010), specifically "to engage with the actors of the controversies" (Venturini et al., 2015, p. 74). An example is the controversy of banning sweets from checkout areas, a RM encounter featured in the findings that we identified early on as evidenced in this methodological note from data collection [OB2]:

> I should look much deeper into sweets-free checkouts, as there is a typical conflict, where the checkouts are either primarily enrolled in the for-profit or into the responsibility… it would be interesting and important to have a conversation with all involved.

The researcher also worked closely with the responsibility director co-defining research goals and together kicking off the research process. The researcher took part in regular weekly stand-up meetings and extraordinary rapid response meetings when crises emerged. He partook in many team events and social celebrations, such as an external black-tie award ceremony, a team-building action sports outing, birthday celebrations and team lunches. Observations were carefully documented in a research diary of approximately 37,000 words consisting of daily observations organized under categories such as substantive, methodological and theoretical notes. A variety of observation forms were used, such as on-site, netnographic, and email-exchange-based observations.

Data collection was enriched through the examination of various BRI documents and instruments (e.g. balanced scorecards, sustainability reports, website and intranet, 'blueprint' documents, new strategies, internal presentations and newsletters, employee newspaper). Overall, 120 internal documents and 71 weekly summaries of external news items were reviewed and analysed. The process of triangulation through observations, in-depth interviews, and a wide array of documents allowed us to gain a more holistic understanding of the relational and processual dynamics underlying the manifestations of RM.

Analysis

Inspired by previous publications (Blaschke et al., 2012; Bourgoin et al., 2020), we use management episodes as units of analysis. Each episode is centred on a particular relational encounter, in the larger RM process of the BRI initiative.

Encounters also served as process 'brackets' (Langley et al., 2013) around a particular sub-part of the process in which smoothing–striating dynamics unfolded in the situated construction of RM enactment (Clegg et al., 2007; Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Painter-Morland, 2008).

We follow Van de Ven (1992) by exploring how (i.e. smoothing–striating dynamics) *and* why (i.e. understanding drivers) the RM enactment process unfolded. Our study is oriented to a process study genre that explores processes as constitutive of "a world in constant flux" (Langley, 2021, p. 254). More specifically, not only is RM enacted through this process, but also through different spaces and times. Rather than being pre-existing entities, encounters are constituted through the RM enactment process.

We conducted a thematic template analysis (King, 2004) in three phases. In Phase 1, we conducted open coding to identify the RM encounters of the BRI. In Phase 2, we analysed the codes one-by-one and thematically clustered them according to shared smoothing–striating patterns. Patterns of smoothing–striating then emerged in four distinct modes: pervasive smoothing, selective smoothing, flexible striating, and rigid striating. In Phase 3, we followed an inductive lead from the previous phase, where we had noticed frequent expressions of too much or too little smoothing and/or striating. Thus, we revisited the RM encounters from Phase 1 to identify expressions where there appeared to be over/under smoothing or striating and clustered them into the corresponding four tension themes. The resulting thematic template is illustrated in the Gioia-style (2012) coding tree (Fig. 1). We then associated different relational encounters with different smoothing–striating patterns (tensions and modes) identified in the previous step.

We used a mixture of visual mapping and temporal bracketing process theorizing tactics (Langley, 1999), adapted to fit our conceptual lens and to gain a greater understanding of relational encounters. Acknowledging the importance of visualization in process theorizing, we created a process map inspired by the analytical flow chart (Langley & Ravasi, 2019) which then became our framework in Fig. 3.

Findings: Smoothing–Striating Tensions and Modes

We distinguish between two aggregated themes, smoothing–striating tensions and modes. We briefly introduce the four sub-themes of each in Fig. 1.

The first aggregate findings theme, *smoothing–striating tensions,* captures demands for relational encounters to produce a different pattern of smoothing–striating that is more conducive to a desired type of RM enactment. In the first subtheme, *oversmoothing,* RM enactment is perceived as too discretionary, which leads to unintended consequences or excessive lines of flight and chaos. In response, the desire for additional striating emerged. *Understriation* tension can lead to a different type of desire for additional striations to both demand and support specific forms of RM enactment that are considered more suitable. For example, too few or inadequate striations can produce evasive RM enactment that focuses on 'the lowest hanging fruit'. Desires for striating may also emerge that demand a focus on more contentious issues, and that support RM practitioners in enacting RM focussed on such issues.

We found *overstriation* to commonly produce desires to smooth away certain striations that impede suitable RM enactment. For instance, striations might limit the capacity of RM enactment to flex and adapt to local conditions, and to contradict the logic of responsibility, creating tensions with commercial logics. Finally, *undersmoothing* tensions typically produce a general desire for more smooth space that allows for creative and discretionary RM enactment. For example, RM actors may struggle to find a space to enact a particular type of RM about which they deeply care.

The second theme that emerged from the aggregate findings, *smoothing–striating modes*, captures the smoothing–striating patterns in encounters in response to the tensions described above. RM in the *pervasive smoothing* mode is enacted across a wide variety of smoothed spaces, and widely disrupts or mutes striations. The pervasive smoothing mode is characterized by opening new spaces for discretionary RM enactment, which enhances creative and innovative thinking and a significant reimagining of directions. It requires considerable energy and, in a pure form, it is hard to achieve. RM in the *selective smoothing* mode also seeks to create new smooth spaces for innovative and flexible RM enactment, but in a clearly demarcated and deliberately selected space. RM encounters tend to be focussed on clear opportunities for smoothing in response to local conditions within the limits of this space. Often, selectively employed striations are used to strengthen the boundary of newly generated smooth space, providing additional protection from pressures that might impede smooth RM enactment.

We found that the *rigid striating* mode of RM unfolds as strictly controlled, aligned, and directed RM enactment. The rigid striating mode produces comprehensively striated spaces where discretionary RM enactment is heavily restricted. Liminal smoothing takes place either in the small smooth spaces remaining inside the grid-like stricture of rigid striations, or in the blurry spaces between contradicting prescriptions. Rigid striating is most suitable in response to desires for greater clarity, order, specific goals/direction, standardisation and/or simplification. In contrast, the *flexible striating* mode seeks striations that ensure specific RM enactment, while also leaving room for discretion. Flexible striating produces striations that have a greater degree of openness

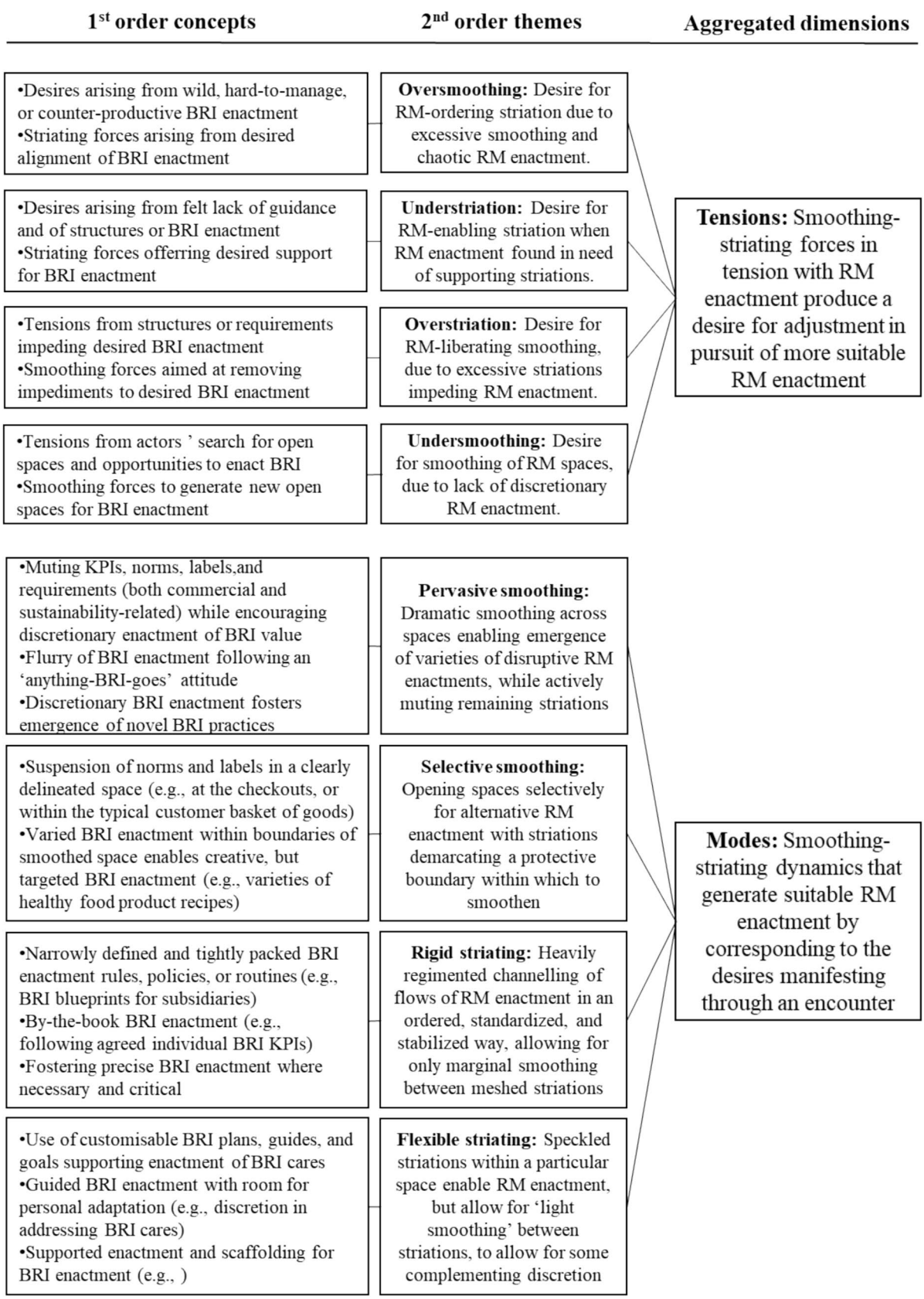


Fig. 1 Thematic template emerged from coding

and flexibility to enable creativity in choosing the most suitable enactment of RM. Such striations both support the enactment of RM and direct the nature and purpose of that enactment. Table 4 offers illustrative quotes to exemplify each of the eight sub-themes.

We now illustrate how participants responded to RM desires in relational encounters with particular RM modes of smoothing and striating.

Smoothing–Striating Responsible Management Encounters

In this section, we illustrate the nature of the four tensions and four modes of RM we identified (see Table 5). Specifically, we present representative vignettes, each featuring one of eight salient relational encounters and together form the larger RM process. With the vignettes, we capture RM enactment throughout the entire life-cycle of the BRI initiative from its rise to its termination. We describe each

Table 4 Illustrative quotes table

Themes	Empirical example excerpts
Tensions	
Oversmoothing	The BRI… when launched, the problem was… there wasn't an explanation of how we… prioritise… a lot of people will take the term of becoming responsible and interpret it for their own area rather than specifically trying to support [Aditi]. [Janet, Commercial Support]
	A professor of food security challenges Aditi to throw overboard the taken-for-granted excessive choice and anything goes attitude on how we should consume food: "Dear consumer, this phantasy of 70 years of choice may be having to alter". [SM6, Media Debate]
Undersmoothing	What we don't do a great enough job at, is… how do you make fruit and veg more affordable then, because the biggest barrier to them is… that… the average pack of… fruit is about £1.50, and a chocolate bar is cheap. [Kurt, Product Team]
	Aditi have got a nerve trying to 'encourage' healthy eating when their fruit and veg costs so much. Obesity was a relative rarity until supermarkets started feeding us a barrel of marketing spin. [SM3, Media Commentary]
Overstriation	We have our energy KPIs, and they have their [product] development KPIs… in their silo, everyone has their own KPI that they need to hit… But they're [KPIs] very much not lined up. So it's difficult to get them to come and join us on a team…a big, big problem. [Martin, Infrastructure Team]
	A greedy man in a grey suit… I do see the men in the grey suits.…in any other place… it's not like that. [Josephine, Customer Relations]
Understriation	An interviewer challenges Aditi's CEO: "You go into a store and there is loads of shelves selling soft drinks,… cakes, biscuits. Why don't you just stop selling… products full of sugar, full of salt? Why do you not make that decision?" [SM1, Media Interview]
	Kay [CR Team] felt Aditi were vulnerable not putting forward their own definition of sustainability: "It's as if we are putting down our pants and say kick us… Aditi should define and meet their own definition. Currently there is a gap". [OB5, Meeting Note]
Modes	
Pervasive smoothing	I wondered if there would be the possibility of actually educating people in… community centres in the stores… a sewing workshop… just crazy… could you imagine?… You start asking yourself, are we a business or a workshop? [Denise, Subsidiary Company]
	Food waste… Aditi has responded… discontinue multi-buys on large bags of salad… 'display until' dates are being removed from fresh fruit and vegetables… 600 bakeries in larger stores have been rearranged to reduce bread on display. [SM4, Media Report]
Selective smoothing	Jacob [CR Team]: "We change what's in the customer basked: Basket 1 versus basket 2… An example, we substitute beef by chicken which is a health benefit and a sustainability benefit, and an economic one, customers save money". [OB6, Meeting Note]
	Aditi's CEO explains how they change the portfolio to become healthier: "Everything in moderation, son, that's what my dad always used to say to me. You give people a choice. Always make sure there is a healthy choice!" [SM1, Media Interview]
Rigid striating	They create an overall strategy and a blueprint. We take that blueprint… [as] best practice across the group… to deliver. [Ruth, CR Liaison]
	A very tight regional structure… Czech Republic Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Turkey… same priorities and programmes. [Haley, CR Team]
Flexible striating	[BRI is a] plan… to pick out key areas where I think, okay well, how can we engage with that within our business? [Dana, Supplier Company]
	Launching its diet service… Shoppers… will be offered guidance, fitness advice and a personally tailored eating plan. [SM5, Media Report]

Table 5 Smoothing–striating tensions and modes across responsible management (RM) encounters

Encounter	Tension	Mode
1. Commerce and climate-PERIOD!	To enact RM in a more efficient and effective way, striating forces exerted by strong commercial and climate mitigation leaders generate demands for ever more striations to capitalize on prosperous times (**understriation**).	**Rigid striating** produces commercial and carbon emissions striations in the form of tightly regulated and controlled commercial and climate change mitigation RM.
2. Take out anything carbon!	Overly sophisticated, detailed, and technical carbon reduction striations (**overstriation**) are perceived as not being understood by customers, a key stakeholder of Aditi's RM, giving rise to the desire for more accessible RM enactment.	Virtually all main carbon striations (e.g. carbon labelling, structures) were either abandoned or muted through **pervasive smoothing**, producing a new smooth space for a variety of non-carbon RM enactments across Aditi.
3. The world and his dog… let's do something!	Smoothing forces of customers' disenchantment with Aditi's commercially striated corporate machine (**undersmoothing**) come together with the force of a customer loyalty crisis generating a desire to create smooth space for emotionally relatable RM enactment, by muting out commercial striations.	The BRI value introduction encouraged everyone's discretionary RM enactment by muting competing commercial striations. A wide variety of actors across Aditi enacted a wild variety of RM (**pervasive smoothing).**
4. Good ideas, but within that framework!	When the smoothing force of the BRI value encouraging anyone to enact anything responsible entangled with the striating force of a culture of strategic alignment in the Aditi department (**oversmoothing**), desires emerged to narrow down the focus areas of RM and to align enactment.	A striating effort was made to bundle potential BRI actions into seven clearly defined essential and strategic cares, together forming the BRI strategy framework, offering a **flexible striating** frame for RM enactment to focus on.
5. It makes sense to remove sweets	Striating forces of looming legislation to take sweets out of the checkout areas and the CEO's verdict to remove unhealthy sweets from these areas, to make space for more healthy product positioning (**undersmoothing**).	The CEOs' decision to take sweets out of the checkouts, **selectively smoothed** checkouts and generated a protective boundary of RM striations against commercial pressures.
6. KPI my world!	The smoothing BRI value and the striating new BRI cares prompted middle management to demand RM striations in the form of BRI-KPIs (**understriation**) as part of their performance assessment.	A **rigid striating** to translate BRI cares into specific KPIs, enabling middle managers to enact RM in their pursuit by counter-balancing the pressure from commercial KPIs.
7. If we think it's right, we'll find a way	Striating forces of health KPIs and healthy eating care, and the striating signal from taking sweets out of the checkout areas (**overstriation**) generated a desire to make enacting RM in the Sweets and Soft Drinks Department manageable by introducing some flexibility.	**Flexible striating**: The director of the Sweets and Soft Drinks Department, was 'forced' to revamp most of his department but was given flexibility for how he would promote Healthy Eating (**flexible striating**).
8. A thousand little deeds	Striating forces related to the rigid BRI framework (cares and KPIs) did not leave a smooth space for the enactment of climate change RM (**undersmoothing**), which was increasingly demanded by the general public.	The BRI framework and department are **selectively smoothed** away, to make space for discretionary enactment of Carbon, Healthy Eating, and Food Waste cares.

encounter by examining the different forces entangling in a particular space and producing smoothing–striating tensions that impede more suitable RM enactment (over/under smoothing/striating). For each encounter, we show how a particular mode of smoothing–striating (pervasive smoothing, selective smoothing, rigid striating, and flexible striating) emerges in response to tensions, and present the RM enactment emerging in each encounter.

Commerce and Climate- PERIOD! [Understriation → Rigid striating]

In the early 2000s at Aditi, the imperative of commercial excellence in the form of efficient and effective management led to prosperous times. In parallel, the striating pressures of the first major wave of corporate climate change engagement prompted Aditi to join the Carbon Disclosure Project as an early corporate leader. The demand for more striating led to an understriation tension. Aditi responded to the tension by harnessing their commercial core competence of efficient and effective goal achievement to focus on carbon mitigation.

In that time before the BRI was launched, RM enactment at Aditi revolved around advanced carbon emission reduction striations, which were maintained by a large powerful group of carbon managers. Our research team met with Hilary, the director of carbon and Aditi's highest-ranking RM specialist. She introduced us to her dedicated Carbon Core Team of approximately 15 at HQ. Hilary also described a group of over 100 carbon liaisons across Aditi and a carbon advisory group including the CEO and many senior leaders.

Highly striated carbon-related responsibilities were further exemplified by Alfred [CR Team] who drew a grid-like structure of striations, while explaining the RM enactment expectations for different product category mangers:

> For each category, grocery, meat, fish, poultry, eggs, they have a total carbon reduction that they need to deliver… There will be some horizontal projects, so refrigerants cuts across… packaging that cuts across… low carbon fertilisers that impact across a number of categories… But there will also be category projects… grocery, maybe, on baked beans... The category owners need to run these… adding up to what we need to deliver.

An example project focussed on carbon reduction, which cut across categories, with the goal of communicating the carbon embedded in each product, was carbon labelling. It "was geared up around how many products can be carbon footprinted" [Grant, CR Team] so they could be further striated through traffic-light-style colour-coding. Footprinting striations also required suppliers to integrate "carbon into joint business plans" [Alfred, CR Team]. He exemplifies how dairy suppliers had to deliver on directed and regulated measurements:

> [We] calculate the footprint of your individual farm… We now have 410 farms foot printed… Kilograms of carbon per litre of milk goes from about 0.9 to 2.1, 2.2; 1.3 is the average. We develop best practice… by looking at farmers who farm in similar ways and saying your footprint is 40% higher…; this is what they're doing differently… and you might want to think about that.

Aditi's RM practices around carbon reduction were rigidly striated around carbon metrics, leaving little smooth open space for broader RM practices. The previous CEO had championed this sophisticated carbon reduction agenda and he was notoriously known for not allowing discussions about deviating from that agenda. In the field notes, we wrote Permissible were "commerce and climate-PERIOD" [OB4, On-site Note].

Take Out Anything Carbon! [Overstriation → Pervasive Smoothing]

Aditi's carbon RM striations created tension with customers who "weren't feeling it… The problem… [of] speaking… about carbon was that… customers just didn't get… carbon labelling…; What we're doing is more impressive but therefore more complicated… [so] we can't really get it across" [Mike, CR Team]. Desires to undo carbon overstriation emerged so Aditi could generate smooth space for more accessible and relatable RM enactment. The parallel BRI value being developed had the potential to foster such RM enactment.

The response was to pervasively smooth away carbon reduction striations to open new spaces for different RM enactment. Within 3 months of the research team's first meeting and the next visit, the situation at Aditi had changed dramatically. Hilary, who previously headed the carbon RM enactment, had been sent on gardening leave. Damian, who was previously the main executive team sponsor of carbon striations, had been "kicked up" to head an Aditi-sponsored research centre at a distant university, and would soon leave Aditi and work at a retailer on a different continent. None of the Carbon Team still worked at headquarters [OB9, On-site Note]. For example, Arnold [CR Team] who had spearheaded the flagship carbon labelling, was moved to an unrelated marketing role:

> *Interviewer:* In your current role, is there any connection to the BRI? *Arnold:* No. *Interviewer:* Does it somehow connect to what you're doing, even indirectly? *Arnold:* Indirectly, only in that I work for the same company.

With these key roles dissolved, many of the carbon striations had been orphaned and de-facto suspended. Due to our initial contact with the head of climate change, our research project was perceived as being associated with the climate striations to be dismantled. As a consequence, Olaf, who conducted the data collection, was also asked to "spend less time working with Aditi" [OB12, Email Exchange] and data collection was in jeopardy.

Jacob and the assembling BRI Team was becoming "the epicentre" [OB10, Methodological Note] of an earthquake-like smoothing that had flattened and torn down previous carbon RM striations. To be given access, it was crucial for Olaf to prove his detachment from carbon striations. He heeded the explicit advice from Saira, a senior researcher who was well connected with Aditi, to avoid the "red rag – carbon saving… [and] take out anything that refers to carbon/climate change … Bring in anything that relates to BRI" [OB8, Presentation Feedback].

The World and His Dog… Let's Do Something! [Overstriation → Pervasive Smoothing]

Leading up to the BRI value launch, Aditi was in a customer loyalty crisis. The market entry of hyper-efficient foreign retailers manifested as a force smoothing away the foundation of Aditi's accessibility-based type of customer loyalty. Under these market conditions, commercial striations, previously the foundation of Aditi's success, stood in the way of creating of a positive image for Aditi, as Josephine [Customer Relations] reported:

> In [customer loyalty] research, they talked to customers about what each retailer looks like to [them]… Retailer M. was a chirpy greengrocer and Retailer S. was a mum—happy, busy with kids—and Aditi was… a greedy man in a grey suit.

Wanting to change this image to foster "emotional loyalty" [Jay, CR Team; Lee, Infrastructure Team] became a smoothing force that muted commercial striations. Emotional loyalty was seen as possible through a focus on more relatable and personal RM enactment, aimed at "being loved again" [Jacob, Kay CR Team; Ruth, CR Liaison; Jed, in-shop]. This impetus aligned with a smoothing force emerging from the previous encounter, to move beyond the hard-to-relate-to carbon-only RM.

The response was that the BRI value was seen as a pervasive smoothing that muted the previously heavily striated focus on commercial efficiency and effectiveness. "The CEO's speech, the launch speech… [which] introduced the [BRI] value" [Earl, Corporate Affairs] was delivered in a Town Hall Kick-off meeting generating credibility and visibility. The BRI value started as an addition to Aditi's values statement that shifted Aditi's normative foundation: "We launched it as a third value… [which] feels different to the other values" ['Treating Colleagues Well' and 'Anything for the Customer'] [Ria, Corporate Affairs].

The BRI value applied to everyone at Aditi. Ria [Corporate Affairs] noted that "everyone should be aware of it; it's our third value". Kathy, [Commercial Support] also stressed

> …everyone heard it, and everybody got it… Everybody said alright, it's all part of BRI… The world and his dog thought, I now need to do something about BRI…People were off doing things, and talking about it, and thinking about doing things.

Since everyone could now enact RM in a variety of personalized ways led to a pervasive muting out of commercial striations, it enabled "people who take a lead as individuals… [to] get on with that within their own area" [Sue, CR Team]. Martin [Infrastructure Team] also highlighted an example of beginning a training programme for young unemployed adults, which he cared about personally. The BRI value "made it much easier for me to create time for it and for me to just go to my boss and say… 'look, it's… exactly what Aditi wants me to be doing…' [It gave me] an excuse to go and do these things". Similarly, Dana [Product Team] instigated a new line of branded beers whose sales revenue generated donations for war veterans. She promoted it as "an exclusive line, no other retailer will have". These pervasive openings of smooth spaces for RM enactment were seen by those in the CR Team as the key to the new personalized and image-wise relatable type of RM enactment. Heather [CR Team] reflected, "the flexibility… really creates a sense of ownership… It's not a case of we just do what we are told to do".

The BRI value also generated new lines of flight, questioning what had previously been taken-for-granted RM enactment. Martin [Infrastructure Team] explained that they sought to "use the BRI to make sure that we're all questioning, all the time, everything we're doing, and not just doing it because that's what we've been told to do". However, while the BRI value smoothed pervasively, generating divergence, discretion, and opportunity, it also striated by demanding RM enactment. We also observed striating in the strategic alignment of this open enactment with emotional loyalty.

Good Ideas, But Within That Framework! [Oversmoothing → Flexible Striating]

The smoothing force of the BRI value from the previous encounter clashed with the striating force of the strong commercial culture of strategic alignment that still existed, generating a feeling of oversmoothing and a desire for additional striations. Across Aditi's departments, employees were seeking guidance on what form their departmental enactment of BRI RM *should* assume. Moreover, employees

were following their own ideas and interpretations of social responsibility, leading to concerns over the coherency and outcomes of the BRI value. As Jay explained, there was "a whole raft of random things that don't fit… [and] a mismatch of things that don't sit nicely [Jay, Corporate Affairs]".

The CR Team responded to the desire for more striation with flexible striating. They developed a set of cares, summarized in the BRI strategy framework (see Fig. 2). These cares were to be emphasized by employees when enacting the BRI value. As Riley [Corporate Affairs, SM7] explained, the framework helps "tackle three long-term challenges that are relevant to us as a global retailer and that matter to society. These challenges are represented in our three *strategic* cares: Healthy Eating, Reducing Food Waste, and Opportunities for the Young". The framework also featured *basic* cares, including "essential commitments… [that are] fundamental to the way we do business every day: Environmental Impact, Responsible Purchasing, Employee Welfare, and Community Engagement" [Riley, Corporate Affairs, SM7].

The flexible striating mode manifested as the BRI framework formed by these cares allowed for discretion to shape novel RM enactment supported by the striating focus offered by each care. Heather [CR Team] noted that "Within that framework, if we have to come up with a good idea… Then I think it's far more likely to work". Accordingly, the flexible striating mode of RM in this encounter, centred on the cares guiding Aditi employees' RM enactment to align with the larger strategic intent behind the BRI, while also allowing for flexibility.

It Makes Sense to Remove Sweets from Checkouts. [Overstriation → Selective Smoothing]

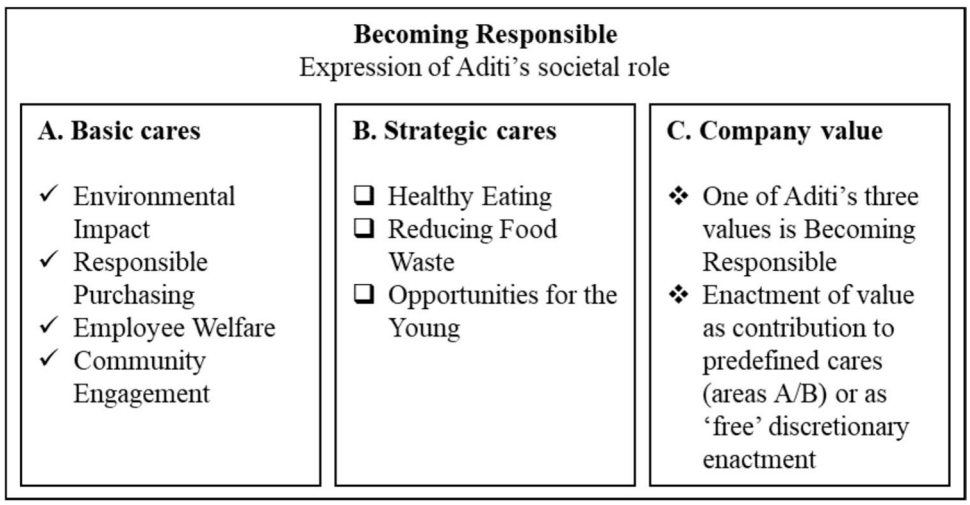
The controversy over removing confectionery items from the checkout areas had been an issue at Aditi for several years and included a long period of stalemate. The high margins that could be achieved with impulse selling of unhealthy products had become an 'untouchable' taken-for-granted commercial striation of the checkout space. It kept managers from responding to RM demands to replace sweets with healthier lower-margin alternatives. However, new striating forces related to RM entered the scene to undo the stalemate. Forces included looming legislation that would potentially force retailers to ban sweets from checkout areas and the Healthy Eating care that had emerged from the previous encounter.

In response, corporate and domestic Aditi CEOs joined forces in a selective smoothing effort, and they decided to remove confectionery items from the checkout space [Sue, CR Team]. This explicit highest-level decision formed a highly striated boundary, shielding the checkout space from further commercial pressures. In doing so, the BRI supported the shift from the checkout area as a space striated to maximize high-margin commercial sales, to opening it up as a space for RM enactment of healthier alternatives. An interviewer from a sustainability magazine commended Jacob [CR Team] on the new smooth checkout space:

> Interviewer: Well-done on getting rid of sweets at the checkouts!
> Jacob: Yes, we believe we are the first in the industry to do this. It's an absolute fit with our approach to helping people manage their health, and their family's health, by not creating temptations. [SM2, Media Interview]

This move was selective in several ways. First, the healthier checkout space had considerable potential to "help customers improve their lives with healthier choices, [so] it makes sense to remove sweets from checkouts… [which are] a major contributor to obesity… It's about how people snack… We can touch more customers… every single day" [Jed, In Shop]. Second, this smoothing targeted an

Fig. 2 The becoming responsible initiative (BRI) framework



opportunity to move along new lines of flight and to specifically address a long-stalled important RM issue. Third, the successful fostering of RM in this embattled space signalled that it might be possible to smooth away other commercial striations impeding RM enactment in other spaces. Kathy [Commercial Support] explained "Now that we've done checkouts… what's the next thing?… The reassurance to make what can be is quite a big leap".

KPI My World! [Understriation → Rigid Striating]

While the BRI value and framework produced smooth and striating forces enabling many to enact RM, middle management still struggled to do so. Middle managers were constantly concerned about "hitting that number on that balanced scorecard" [Cecilia, CR Liaison]. Ramona [CR Team] described middle managers' perspective: "You need to be sure…, by whatever relative term, you are either delivering or you're not delivering enough… That's the tension we have got and that we need to relieve".

Middle managers felt an imbalance between comparatively weak BRI striations and the highly striated commercial Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) by which they were evaluated. Therefore, middle management began to demand even more rigid RM striations than the ones that had emerged with the launch of the BRI cares to counter-balance commercial KPIs. Rosie [Human Resources] highlighted middle managers' tensions: "How do you KPI my world? What does good look like? Do we set targets? … How do we really demonstrate that it makes a real difference?… I think we haven't solved that problem yet."

The rigidly striating response was to introduce KPI-based middle management RM. BRI cares were translated into a set of more finely grained KPIs on the Aditi-wide balanced scorecard. Each new KPI had a strong relationship to particular managers' remits as BRI-KPIs became part of their performance evaluations and were seen as major drivers for middle managers to enact RM. Jay [Corporate Affairs] described the effect by asserting that if "we're going to measure you really hard on these 12 numbers… it's hardly a surprise then that middle managers focus on getting all of their people to deliver the 12 numbers". Accordingly, the BRI-KPIs opened up a variety of middle management spaces for RM enactment.

We'll Find a Way if We Think it's Right. [Overstriation → Flexible Striating]

The loss of the checkout as a high-margin revenue space for irresponsible unhealthy products manifested as a major striating force among those "responsible for selling everything that is bad for you" [Jason, CR Team]. There was no escaping the enactment of the Healthy Eating RM, even at the cost of commercial benefits. For example, Jacob [CR Team, OB1, Netnographic Observation] described how during a launch presentation of the Healthy Eating care David, Director of the Sweets and Soft Drinks Department, had muttered under his breath "Well, that's me screwed". Karen [Commercial Support] further contextualized David's reaction to the Healthy Eating care: "[He was] feeling very pressured because all he sells is sweets and fizzy drinks… [He was] feeling like, this is going to affect my sales; this is going to affect my margins and the commercial [bottom line]". Arising from this RM overstriation tension, there was a desire for fewer striations, and, in particular, for only the kind that would enable RM enactment in line with the BRI. However, the striations also needed to be enacted in a way that allowed managers like David to flexibly address BRI cares.

The seven BRI cares were at the centre of such RM in the flexible striating mode. If a manager's remit related to any of these cares, there was a strong striating force pressuring managers to address each care, while also giving them discretion in how to enact RM. For instance, the Healthy Eating care provided a flexible striation for the Sweets and Soft Drinks Department by enabling David to enact RM through experimentation with alternative ways of reducing sugar:

> David has done… taken sugar out through reformulation… [such as] a lot more low sugar content,… playing around with promotions to understand how far we can go to push people towards a healthier diet… Aditi customers consume 20% less sugar in soft drinks than… two years ago as a result of doing this combination… It is really powerful if you can do lots of different things. [Janet, Commercial Support]

Jacob [CR Team] was impressed with how the flexible striation mode of RM enabled David to go "straight into delivery mode… If we think it's right to do, we'll find a way and that's what he's been doing". The combination of enabling striating of BRI cares combined with flexibility using each manager's unique ingenuity enabled managers to enact RM even against commercial striations, as Jacob [CR Team] illustrated

> [David has been] open and constructive about it. He hasn't blocked… hasn't said, we can't do that… although he's got to deal with all the sweets suppliers who are not pleased that we're taking sweets off checkouts… They fear, probably rightly… a drop in trade at Aditi and that competitors will follow… That's dramatic!

A Thousand Little Deeds [Overstriation → Selective Smoothing]

Intensifying rigid and flexible striating forces characterized the later enactment of BRI RM. This overstriation produced a desire for more smoothing, which ultimately led to the

replacement of the BRI. On the one hand, several of the highly striated cares did not work out, such as "Opportunities for the Young" about which Grant [CR Team] admitted that "to be fair, we never got it right" [OB20, Meeting Note]. However, sticking to the striation of the BRI framework with its predetermined set of cares also meant that failed cares were continued. On the other hand, the increase in BRI striations also stood in the way of enacting necessary RM beyond the predetermined BRI cares. Most prominently, it impeded the enactment of the previously muted climate change mitigation RM (see Encounter 2), which by now re-emerged as an ardent public concern [OB19, Netnographic Observation]. Surviving climate change RM enactment was backgrounded. It became only one of many RM enactment types behind the striation of the environmental impact care of the BRI, when the framework had emerged. As a consequence, the striation of the BRI framework (Fig. 2) consisting of predetermined cares was perceived as not leaving sufficient room for adjusting RM enactment to meet the needs of these developments.

In response, striations related to problematic BRI cares were selectively smoothed away in a deliberate and targeted manner. Consequently, the larger BRI framework was smoothed away. This selective smoothing included muting out any explicit reference and trace back to BRI. Larry [CR Team] called this "a job well done by the Communications Department" [OB21, Meeting Note]. In particular, the BRI label and framework were entirely absent from Aditi's communicated RM timeline [OB15, Netnographic Observation]. The RM reports posted online started after the BRI framework had been smoothed away, deleting the BRI from the official record [OB18, Netnographic Observation]. Many employees associated with the BRI, including Jacob who had headed it, left Aditi [OB17, Netnographic Observation].

The BRI was replaced by a smoother agenda called a Thousand Little Deeds (TLD). Grant [CR Team] compared how "BRI was not free, TLD was more bottom up, not as top down". Grant also described how the TLD approach strongly resembled the starting point of the BRI "as just one of Aditi's values that everyone could enact in their respective roles" [OB20, Meeting Note]. However, TLD selectively opened spaces for RM enactment for the three surviving cares of Healthy Eating, Food Waste Reduction, and Climate Change [OB15&16, Netnographic Observation]. In summary, this selective smoothing enabled discretionary enactment within the boundaries of the fewer remaining cares.

Discussion: Smoothing–Striating in the Responsible Management Enactment Process

Our process framework in Fig. 3 brings together the eight encounters introduced in the findings section. It zooms out to visualize the smoothing–striating forces in the larger BRI RM process: The climate-only RM era's overstriated end point in Encounter 1 triggered the shift towards initially smoother BRI RM (Encounters 2–7). The overstriated BRI end point, in turn, triggered a shift to the TLD RM era (from Encounter 8).

Our research question was aimed at gaining a greater understanding of the processual dynamics that underlie the enactment of RM, by transcending the freedom *or* control contingency approach. The conceptual framework that has emerged from our findings addresses this question in three ways. First, theorizing RM enactment as a rhizomatic process of smoothing–striating encounters explains the construction of the distributed nature of RM enactment processes. We can see how a variety of complementary smoothing–striating dynamics unfold and how such an analysis transcends the freedom *or* control contingency approach. Second, we theorize entangled smoothing–striating dynamics as a 'tension spring' that drives RM enactment processes forward. This insight transcends the freedom *or* control contingency approach. Specifically, the smoothing–striating tension spring works through entangled smoothing *and* striating dynamics. Third, zooming into individual smoothing–striating episodes allows us to transcend the freedom *or* control contingency approach by understanding the variety of generative smoothing–striating dynamics unfolding in each encounter. We now more fully discuss these three central insights from our framework in light of previous work.

The Rhizomatic Process of Responsible Management Enactment

When visualizing our empirical findings, we noticed striking similarities with "rhizomatic" processes (Chia, 2002; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Rhizomatic processes are characterized by many distributed lateral connections (the arrows representing smoothing and striating forces) between "bulbs" (RM encounter-swirls) that are interrelated through "movement in all possible directions and the generative connections among different points" (Bissola et al., 2017, p. 42). Gehman et al., (2022, p. 293) defined the metaphor of rhizome as

> a type of plant stem that… is composed of many nodes, each of which can sprout a shoot. The shoots

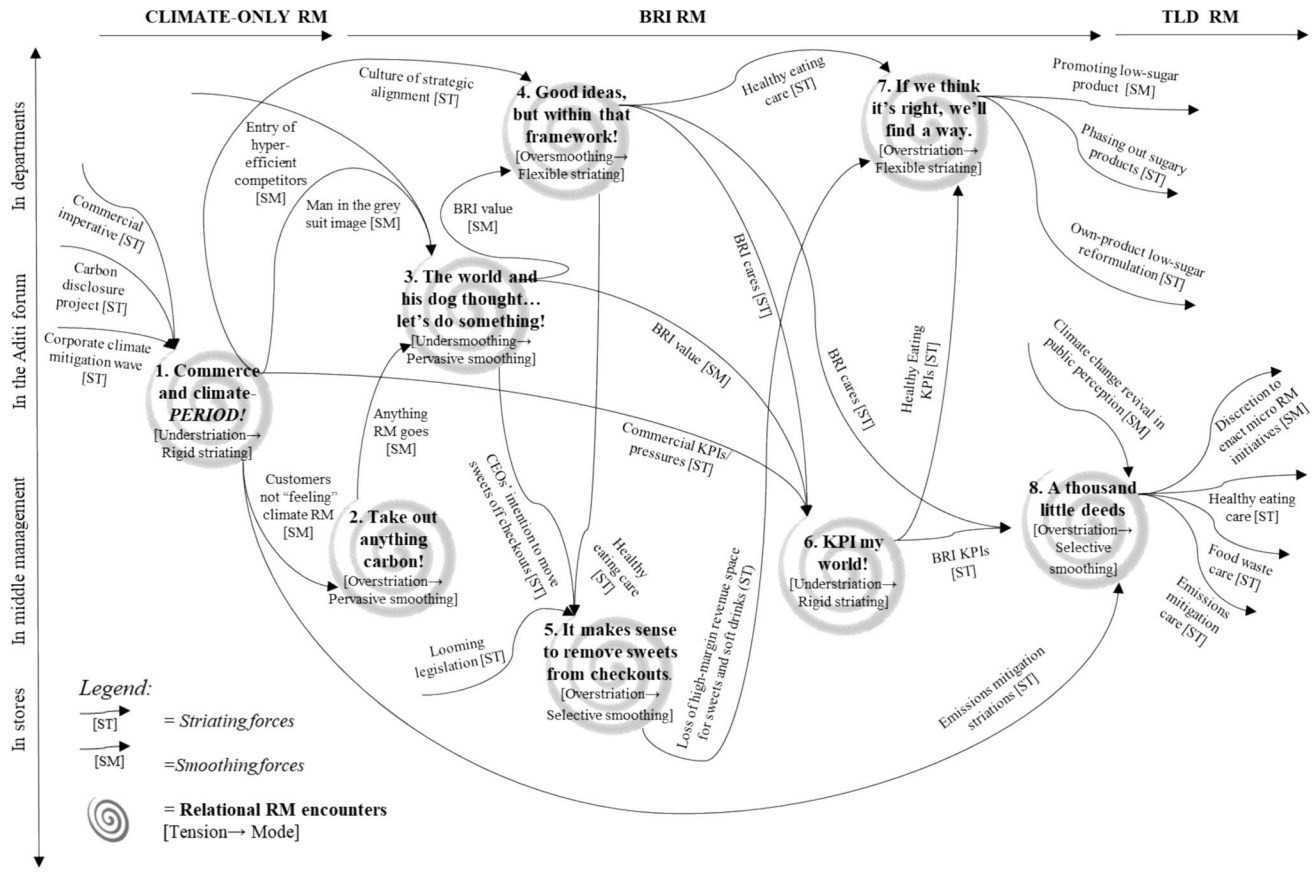


Fig. 3 The rhizomatic smoothing–striating process of responsible management (RM) enactment at aditi

grow out of the ground, becoming the visible part of the plant, while the rhizome itself is often hidden from human sight.

Rhizomatic Dynamics

The metaphor of the rhizome helps us to explain the emergence of RM enactment as temporary manifestations in a continuous RM process of becoming responsible (Chia, 2002). It allows us to appreciate the rhizome-generating role of smoothing–striating forces, although they may be invisible until they are entangled in relational encounters (Kuronen & Huhtinen, 2017). For example, the striating forces of the climate-change-only RM era were muted and 'forced underground', to emerge again when they got entangled in the final "A thousand little deeds" Encounter 8. Management co-generated the renewed manifestation of climate change mitigation as a key care of RM at Aditi. This dynamic also grasps and empirically enriches organizational paradox theory's foundational proposition, that tensions persist even when not visible in an actual tension-generating event (Hahn & Knight, 2021).

Even though the corporate RM process carries the same unifying label of BRI, it cannot be understood as just one unified entity that is either more freedom-based or more control-based. Instead, the RM process is a distributed multiplicity of continuously emerging and dissolving RM encounters. RM enactment produces and is produced in varying RM encounters (Gherardi & Laasch, 2022; Schüßler et al., 2022) that are enacted in distinct but interrelated modes (Burghausen & Balmer, 2014; Latour, 2013; Zielke, 2022) of smoothing–striating. This process resembles how paradoxes are characterized more widely as "episodic" (our encounters) responses to tensions (Smith & Lewis, 2011, p. 386) that surface paradox demands (Smith & Tracey, 2016). However, we also go beyond this insight by showing how otherwise invisible forces interlink encounters, forming an emergent and coherent process.

Paradoxical Co-production of Distributed Smoothing–Striating

Figure 3 maps the patterns of smoothing and striating forces at play in the making of RM. The figure enables us to zoom out of the individual encounters (Cressman, 2009; Nicolini,

2009) to explore the distributed process across encounters. It also allows us to reconnect the encounters and to see the emergent dynamics generated by the smoothing–striating of the larger RM process. Finally, it reveals how each RM encounters is characterized by a distinct mode of smoothing–striating, while also being involved in a process of co-evolution (Cooren et al., 2008; Schaltegger et al., 2016) with smoothing–striating modes in other encounters.

As the illustration in Fig. 3 implies, very different modes of smoothing–striating can productively co-exist in the same RM process. They can even coincide at the same point in time and positively influence each other. For instance, while the pervasive smoothing related to the initial BRI value was still enacted widely, the more rigidly striated BRI-KPIs were also emerging for middle managers (see "The world and his dog… let's do something" Encounter 3 and "KPI my world!" Encounter 6). This way, suitable RM enactment was enabled for a larger group of distinct Aditi actor groups, and in more diverse spaces of the corporation. Accordingly, multiple modes of smoothing–striating may produce different modes of smooth and striated enactments in the same RM process, and these effects are often mutually dependent and synergistically interlinked to generate more suitable and wider corporate RM enactment.

This understanding of the role of smoothing–striating dynamics as continuously emerging speaks to the RM discussion's exploration of RM as emergent from distributed working life in business (Ennals, 2014; Kokubu et al., 2022). These insights allow us to appreciate the need to transcend the freedom-versus-control discussion centred on the choice between free or controlled entities of responsible managers, corporations, or practices. Instead, we move towards a more fluid smoothing–striating dynamics study of RM which allows us to develop insights of this kind.

Smoothing–Striating as a Tension Spring

The findings show how RM responses to over/under smoothing–striating tensions (Aroles & McLean, 2016; Battilana et al., 2015; Smith & Lewis, 2011) generated a series of relational encounters that constitute the RM enactment process. Tensions generated through smoothing–striating forces were resolved in RM encounters through the use of a particular mode of RM enactment, which, in turn, generated new smoothing–striating forces that again generated tensions to be resolved in new encounters. These tensions drove the process forward from encounter to encounter, like a 'tension spring' of the RM enactment process.

Tension Spring Dynamics

Our empirical illustrations highlight how tensions and desires for more suitable RM enactment (more or less smoothing or striating) emerged from the forces (the arrows in Fig. 3) that entangled in each encounter (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983/1992; Holland, 2013; Painter-Morland, 2011). Managers responded to the arising smoothing–striating tensions impeding suitable RM enactment with more suitable RM modes of smoothing–striating. Accordingly, the smoothing–striating forces of RM produce encounters and were produced in RM encounters (Bell & Vachhani, 2020; Blaschke et al., 2012). Our findings also show how RM encounters emerged when smoothing–striating forces and actors of RM were entangled around a certain RM tension (Latour, 2004; Pérezts et al., 2011; Van der Byl et al., 2020; Venturini, 2010), as illustrated by the swirls in Fig. 3 at the centre of each encounter. We showed how each smoothing–striating mode suited a unique assemblage of forces and actors that temporarily produced a particularly suitable type of RM enactment for each respective encounter.

Accordingly, smoothing–striating forces entered into encounters, co-producing one another, and generating encounters that formed the larger living tissue of corporate RM processes. For instance, the striating force of the national and global CEOs' final verdict to remove sweets from checkout areas was key to the emergence of this RM initiative to be enacted. The verdict, in turn, emerged from the smoothing BRI value launch encounter, liberating the CEOs to make this long-contested decision (see the arrow emanating from "The world and his dog thought… let's do something", Encounter 3 to "It makes sense to remove sweets from checkout", Encounter 5). These forces emanating from and entering into RM encounters produced generative tensions (Battilana et al., 2015; Fishwick & D'Urso, 2024; Michalovich et al., 2023; Stassart et al., 2018). They drove the process forward (Aroles & McLean, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), and co-produced RM enactment in new encounters.

Accordingly, our four modes of smoothing–striating can be understood as "modes of tension work" (Abbey & Falmagne, 2008, p. 95). This work converts smoothing–striating tensions into productive tensions that generate suitable RM enactment and ideally produces new generative tensions, triggering new RM enactment encounters. This way, we expand Abbey and Falmagne's (2008) initial individual-level conceptualization of tension work to capture a collective type of tension work instead.

Paradoxical Smoothing–Striating Driving the Responsible Management Process

The smoothing–striating tension spring transcends the freedom *or* control contingency approach as smoothing *and* striating dynamics are found to be key to driving the RM enactment process forward. This insight shares some of Smith and Lewis (2011) thinking about the dynamic equilibrium model

of paradox, but it also extends their work. For instance, we share the assumption of "constant motion" (p. 386) of smoothing–striating in a dynamic interaction that moves RM enactment forward from encounter to encounter. However, unlike Smith and Lewis (2011, p. 386), we do not consider smoothing–striating as "opposing forces". Instead, our process model is built on the mutually generative dynamics where smoothing enables striation and vice versa, and where these synergetic dynamics generate suitable RM for each encounter. This insight resonates with Somers-Hall's (2018, p. 258) appreciation of encounters of smoothing–striating forces as a source of readjustment in distinct places: "Encounters matter as a contrary movement, as a certain obstacle, a certain impurity that mixes it up, that interrupts its impulse [elan], that gives it such and such a degree here, another one over there".

Varied Intra-Encounter Dynamics

Zooming into the individual encounters enables us to see how smoothing–striating not only paradoxically co-exist, but also how they depend on each other to foster RM enactment that is suitable to each encounter. It also enables us to see how each of the smoothing–striating modes in which RM is enacted correspond to the distinct situated needs for RM that are unique to the respective encounter. Exploring smoothing–striating encounter-by-encounter offers a micro-level lens that established another alternative to the freedom *or* control contingency approach. It allows us to move away from discrete choices of either-or, to paradox modes of both-and in an encounter.

Intra-encounter Dynamics

The micro-level lens of the encounter dynamics enables us to develop insights building upon recent advances in the freedom and control discussion, such as Krüger's (2023) micro-processes of deliberation and Crane and colleagues' (2022) micro-dynamics of freedom and unfreedom. Studying such dynamics encounter-by-encounter holds great promise to discover and study unique paradoxical micro-dynamics. For example, Dierksmeier (2018, p. 8) proposes that, in theory, "certain strictures liberate… and certain laws set us free". We can empirically find evidence for Dierksmeier's proposition through intra-encounter dynamics. For instance, we observed when rigid KPI striations in the "KPI my world", Encounter 6, liberated middle managers to enact RM by adding BRI-KPIs as striations to commercial KPIs.

Paradoxical Smoothing–Striating Intra-encounter Dynamics

We also find empirical evidence for such intriguing in-encounter paradox dynamics in the insight of the four smoothing–striating modes, which involve paradoxical dynamics *between both* smoothing *and* striating. For instance, selective smoothing in Encounter 5 (i.e. "It makes sense to… remove sweets off checkout"), required strong striations to form the protective boundary enabling the smooth space inside this boundary. Similarly, the dominantly pervasive smoothing in the "Let's do something BRI" encounter involved striating, particularly when decreeing that the new value would apply to everyone in a quasi-mandatory fashion, and by making it part of Aditi's values statement. The value in this encounter both liberated and forced employees to engage in RM.

Choosing the smoothing–striating encounter as a unit of analysis offers an insightful alternative to established lenses and their respective units of analysis for the study of freedom and control and similar managerial workplace paradoxes (Barry, 2007; Reeves & Sinnicks, 2021). The encounter offers an alternative to libertarian stakeholder theory (Freeman & Phillips, 2002) with the relationship between managers and stakeholders as the main unit of analysis (Kaufman, 2002; Lea, 2004), and the organizational-level units of analysis that are common in the study of corporate democracy and participation (Brenkert, 1992).

Conclusions and Future Research Directions

Our study of RM enactment illustrating smoothing–striating at the retailer Aditi allows us to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics that underlie the enactment of RM. Our process model of RM enactment explains how tensions of over/under smoothing–striating arose, which, in turn, drove the rhizomatic process of interrelated RM encounters forward. Each encounter unfolded in one of four modes of RM enactment: pervasive smoothing, selective smoothing, rigid striating, or flexible striating. We now introduce the contributions and limitation of our research, as well as the salient future research directions emerging from them.

Contributions

We contribute to three literature streams: responsible management, freedom and control, and organizational paradoxes and tensions.

Priming Responsible-Management-as-Process Studies

Our approach offers a process perspective on RM to a field that has been dominated by responsible entity ontologies including responsible corporation, responsible manager, and responsible practice. Our rhizomatic process model of RM enactment can serve as a foundation for future research that connects our insights with recent work on RM situatedness

(Gherardi & Laasch, 2022) and on the importance of process encounters as unique niches for RM enactment (Schüßler et al., 2022). Our process perspective can also serve as a foundation for exploring the processual dynamics of other key RM tensions, like tensions between economic, social, and environmental logics (Van der Byl et al., 2020), or tensions between commercial logics and an emerging RM logic of RM (Radoynovska et al., 2020). Our modes of smoothing–striating in the RM process lend themselves to the exploration of distinct modes for different RM core dynamics, such as scaling RM or engaging with ir/responsible futures (Mandich, 2020; Papazu & Nelund, 2018). Finally, our process model extends the theoretical-methodological repertoire for studying rhizomatic organizational dynamics by contributing a visual–empirical representation of the rhizomatic process. Previous work has eschewed insights from visual representations by dominant textual–conceptual descriptions (e.g. Bissola et al., 2017; Gehman et al., 2022; Kuronen & Huhtinen, 2017).

Transcending Freedom *or* Control Contingencies

We contribute an alternative lens for future dynamic studies of freedom- *and* control-related phenomena. Our contributions of rhizomatic smoothing–striating dynamics, the smoothing–striating 'tension spring', and intra-encounter dynamics showcase how our approach helps explain what would have been impossible with the dominant freedom *or* control contingency approach. Therefore, we contribute by transcending the dominant study of freedom *or* control contingencies (e.g. Lindebaum et al., 2022) that studies *both* smoothing *and* striating paradoxically (Smith & Lewis, 2022). More specifically, our approach seeks to examine how they emerge in inseparable entanglement and mutually constitute each other, as shown in a few pioneering studies on freedom and control (Crane et al., 2022; Dierksmeier, 2018; Krüger, 2023).

Uncovering Processual Paradox Dynamics

We also contribute to the paradox discussion by addressing the call by Schad et al., (2016, p. 43) for "examining the persistence of paradox through a process perspective". We offer a process study methodology that could guide processual studies of other paradoxes (Lewis & Smith, 2022). The many similarities, complementarities, and connections between our process model of smoothing striating and the paradox literature further emphasize the relevance of our process framework. In particular, we offer a more nuanced appreciation of the persistent, distributed, and interconnected nature of paradox (Hahn & Knight, 2021; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021; Sheep et al., 2017). We also offer the paradoxical encounter (as part of the process) as a promising novel micro-level unit of paradox analysis and an insightful alternative to the individual and group-level units of analysis (Schad et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations of this study offer opportunities for further exploration. First, our research was conducted in the context of *corporate* RM, which questions the transferability of our findings to non-corporate RM enactment. In particular, the distributed nature of RM enactment processes may materialize differently if RM enactment is studied in smaller businesses. In addition, the typically hierarchical, managerialist, and strictly shareholder value-oriented striations that are typical for corporations may lead to smoothing–striating dynamics that are unique to corporate RM enactment. We invite future research that explores smoothing–striating dynamics and RM enactment in purposively chosen non-corporate settings such as in small- and medium-sized enterprises, cooperatives, and NGOs.

A second limitation is that due to the focus on corporate RM enactment processes, we implicitly learn much about the process itself and the constitution of the responsible corporate RM entity. However, we learn less about the other two entities introduced: the responsible manager or a particular responsible practice. Future research could study RM enactment processes related to particular managers, managerial groups, or particular practices. Such research would illuminate how ir/responsible entities are produced through processes, just as we have learnt how the responsible corporation Aditi was produced through the rhizomatic smoothing–striating process.

Finally, our study only focuses on a single paradox. Future research could harness our framework by studying processual dynamics between multiple paradoxes. Lewis and Smith (2022) also recently recommended this key future research avenue for paradox research. A salient example could be to study the interaction between RM smoothing–striating dynamics' and the paradox tension of having to achieve partly contradictory economic, social, and environmental goals (Hahn et al., 2014).

Appendix

Thematic Semi-structured Interview Guide

Theme 1: Introduction and Baseline Information

Example prompts:

- Please describe your role, position, and typical activities.
- What previous professional experience do build on?

- How does your current and past work, related to the BRI?
- How did you get involved in the BRI?

Theme 2: BRI Enactment (Zooming In)

Example prompts:

- In what form do you enact the BRI? How do you do BRI enactment?
- What typical tools, processes, competences, people, etc., do you engage when enacting the BRI, and how?
- What has driven BRI enactment for you, and how?
- What is next, what impacts and consequences do you think your enactment of the BRI has?

Theme 3: Process Unpacking (Zooming Out)

Example prompts:

- What has led to your involvement in the BRI? How did you get involved?
- Please tell us how the BRI has evolved from your perspective.
- What key developments (e.g. BRI events, developments, or milestones) can you think about and how did these come about?
- How did the above key developments interrelate and interact with each other?
- How did key developments link up over time?

Note Prompts in this inductive semi-structured interview design are a non-exclusive list of guiding phrases in the spirit of each theme. Interviewers used them discretionarily and cautiously in order to nudge interviewees to externalize their insights relevant to each theme.

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Data availability Due to the anonymization procedure agreed with the research site, transcripts of conducted interviews are only accessible to the authors.

Declarations

Employment We declare that all authors are employed by academic institutions that may benefit from the publication of this manuscript, e.g. through improved institutional rankings and the relevance of publications to accreditations. We further declare that all authors ensure future employment and thus future salaries and potentially future promotions and bonus payments through the publication of this work.

Financial Interests We declare to have no financial interests other than the ones declared in "Employment".

Non-financial Interests There are no non-financial interests to be reported, beyond the usual satisfaction hopefully see one's work appreciated in the form of a publication.

Disclosure of Work with Humans and Biological Materials This research is conceptual work that did not involve biological material. Human participants, none of them of vulnerable groups, were involved through interviews. Appropriate research ethics approval was obtained from the University of Manchester.

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