



On theory as a ‘deliverable’ and its relevance in ‘policy’ arenas

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ABSTRACT

This paper comments on Lee Parker's paper on “Qualitative management accounting research: deliverables and relevance”. Using it as a starting point, it highlights the need for more informed modes of theorizing as opposed to ‘more theories’ and the performative effects of theorising. Theories and theorising already matter although what they ‘deliver’ and influence will be contingent on their instantiation in specific action nets. Further, in order that such social practices might continue to generate desirable consequences, stronger forms of research training should be developed.

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1. Introduction

Lee's paper on qualitative management accounting research reflects on the contribution of the qualitative research approach to management accounting research and seeks to map out paths for the future. In reference to the methodological debate that characterized the accounting research community in the 1980s, Lee argues that the time for defending qualitative research as a legitimate approach to researching management accounting issues is long gone and that it is now prudent to take stock of what qualitative research has achieved for management accounting theory and practice and to explore what remains to be achieved. The paper connects research done in the name of qualitative management accounting to management accounting theory and practice as well as policy. After over 30 years of qualitative management accounting research, such a reflective practice is warranted for at least two reasons: to deepen our knowledge of who we are as a research community and the impact of what we do; and to also help improve the quality of what we do. On this note, we commend the effort of the author although we disagree with key parts of the argument.

Lee rightly points out that the debate about qualitative and quantitative approaches to management accounting research is behind us. We believe with Healy and Perry (2000) that the quality and contribution of the qualitative research tradition should be evaluated relative to its own ontological and epistemological terms. For this reason, it will not be appropriate for us to focus on deepening our knowledge of qualitative management accounting research in relation to the quantitative approach in a manner that is reminiscent of the debates of the 1980s. Re-engaging in a debate about what qualitative approaches can do that the quantitative approach does not, speak of self-justification and risks being interpreted as an act of self-indulgence about potentiality (ability/capacity to contribute) rather than actuality (what has been achieved and/or could have been achieved). Rather, we will be engaging with our concrete experiences in the use of the qualitative approach in management accounting research (reflection-on-action) and proposing ways to modify the experience (reflection-for-action).

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2. Engaging with the field

Lee sees the qualitative researcher's close and frequent engagement with the field as an important means through which qualitative management accounting research can make (and has made) important contribution to knowledge. This is partly because such an engagement offers richer contextualized accounts and understanding of organizational and management practices, and also because a direct contact with the field affords opportunities to distinguish the manifest from the latent. He argues further that the qualitative researchers focus on population subsets and specific organizational circumstances may be consistent with the preferences of practising managers and accountants. We agree with Lee about the field holding significant potential for the qualitative researcher to contribute in a unique fashion. However, stating that the field offers such potential is not new as work dating back to the 1980s had already highlighted such potential. In fact, two crucial questions that could have been better examined in Lee's work are: (a) what has been realized so far in relation to the stated potential? And (b) how has the qualitative research community engaged with the field and what are the consequences? We will address these issues in turn.

The first of our two questions has been examined in a limited way in Lee's paper. In the field, qualitative management accounting researchers have focused on examining management accounting and organizational practices and this has led to the production of enactive knowledge; knowledge based on the active use of management accounting in organizations. Lee has articulated this enactive knowledge in terms of management accounting research findings on change. To summarize, findings from qualitative management accounting research show that management (and organizational) change is an interactive effect of complex, unpredictable, non-linear and less controllable associations of multiple entities including changes in social, cultural, political and economic conditions. These findings have led to the active questioning and reinterpretation of management accounting as theorized and in practice. To this end, qualitative management accounting research has made a distinctive contribution. More, perhaps, could have been done to focus on specific achievements in other research areas in order that present achievements could be compared against future possibilities.

More particularly, it is our second question that has not been adequately addressed in Lee's work. This relates to how the qualitative research community engages with the field. Here, Lee's work focuses on two issues: (a) encouraging researchers to engage with the field and (2) describing the tools field researchers commonly use. We argue that neither the field nor the methods of data collection highlighted by Lee are unique to the qualitative tradition (see [Ahrens and Chapman, 2006](#)). Rather, it is "a particular way of knowing the field" ([Ahrens and Chapman, 2006](#); p. 819) that forms the basis of the unique contributions of qualitative research. It would appear from conference/seminar presentations and journal review processes that a significant number of qualitative management accounting research struggle with the concept of the field and as a consequence engage poorly with it. For some of these researchers, the field is interpreted as a specific locale (for instance, the Microsoft office in Toronto) or as an organization/firm where opportunities exist for gathering documentary, interview and observational data. This has significantly constrained the ability of most qualitative management accounting researchers to engage in ways that contribute to theory and practice. It also partly explains the high rate of rejection of qualitative management accounting papers in some journal review processes.

The field, in our view, is not necessarily a specific locale or a firm but a constellation of theoretical ideas, empirical sites and research problems. Sound qualitative research occurs where these three factors intersect and it is at this intersection that we may be able to speak about the contribution of qualitative management accounting research. For us, this is a crucial challenge for the future development of the qualitative tradition in management accounting research. [Ahrens and Chapman \(2006\)](#) offer a good starting point for addressing this challenge but more needs to be done.

3. Theory and theorizing

[Ahrens and Chapman \(2006, p. 820\)](#) argue that "doing qualitative field studies is not simply empirical but a profoundly theoretical activity". That is, theory and theorising are very significant to the ability to contribute to knowledge through qualitative research. Arguing that qualitative management accounting research is a theoretical activity raises two fundamental issues: (a) the contribution of the qualitative research tradition to a theoretical body of knowledge in management accounting ([Vaivio, 2008](#)) and (b) the role of informing theory in the conduct of qualitative management accounting research.

Keating (cited in [Vaivio, 2008](#)) identifies three ways in which research can contribute in developing a theoretical body of knowledge: theory discovery; theory refinement; and theory refutation. Lee's paper suggest that qualitative management accounting has made some contribution to management accounting knowledge in all these areas; albeit unequally. On theory discovery, he notes that qualitative management accounting has led to the development of new concepts and relationships and more informed theory. Qualitative management accounting, he writes, has also contributed to refining and broadening our theoretical knowledge of management accounting by moving management accounting discussion and discourse beyond its neoclassical economic roots to include sociological and critical interpretations. Such a move has problematized the neoclassical economic theorising of cause-effect, linearity, predictability and generalizability. The existing body of qualitative management accounting research reminds us that in practice things are non-linear, unpredictable and context-specific. Further, qualitative management accounting research has generated knowledge that refutes the neutrality, objectivity, and independence assumptions about the accounting craft. Instead, through qualitative research we have come to know that management accounting is inextricably implicated in organizational politics and power relationships, in creating particular modes of subjectivity, in ex post rationalization of actions and decisions, and in reifying organizational reality.

Lee does not discuss the role of informing theory. Instead, he endorses the use of multiple theories. Lee writes that qualitative research has enriched management accounting “with the multi-theoretic explanations of management accounting in the field” and has provided an opportunity for researchers to learn incrementally more from each theoretical lens. Qualitative research, he concludes, has not only enabled freedom and flexibility in the scope of theories applied to empirical investigation but has benefited from it. While this is largely true, it is also important to reflect over how in practice qualitative management accounting research has engaged with the use of theory (theorising). Here it is worth extending the views expressed in [Vaivio \(2008\)](#) and [Chapman \(2008\)](#), who note the poor state of theorising in qualitative management accounting research. In what he terms as “heavy theoretical frontload”, [Vaivio \(2008\)](#) describes how qualitative researchers provide theoretical materials (usually at the front-end of a paper) that are neither tightly connected to the research problem of interest nor directly related to the empirical material. This, we believe, reflects a struggle, within the qualitative research community, to distinguish between theory and theorising. Most people emphasize theory at the expense of theorizing when what we actually need is the latter (the former being a source of inspiration), if we are to make any significant contribution to management accounting knowledge.

Theorising is about drawing on an informing theory to make sense of an empirical research problem/question and to draw relationships between the research problem, the research context, and the underlying data with the view to advancing new or incremental theoretical and practical knowledge. Theorising in this regard is a sense-making exercise (not a summary of an existing theory). As sense-making, theorising implies constructing sensible and sensitive accounts of the field rather than some “meandering storyline” (to borrow from [Vaivio, 2008](#)). This involves the use of an informing theory (see [Llewellyn, 2003](#), for discussion of what constitute an informing theory) to provide: (a) stimulus into your research problem (making it relevant, compelling, interesting and researchable); (b) an interpretive mechanism for the researcher to understand the field and to share this understanding with others; and (c) retrospective explanation of field data that looks surprising, unusual or discrepant ([Weick, 1995](#)). All too often qualitative management accounting studies do not engage in theorising as a sense making exercise; theory ends up being an ill-fitting ‘wrapping’ around a description of action.

The point we seek to emphasize is that the availability of multi-theoretical lenses to the qualitative researcher only defines the potential for the qualitative tradition to contribute to management accounting knowledge. Realising this potential depends on how theories are used, tested and validated by scientific communities. The use of multiple theoretical lenses needs also to be carefully considered as inconsistent and contradictory philosophical positions might result. Transaction costs economics, for instance, predisposes one to ask and answer certain types of research questions. Actor-network theory takes us in different directions. Seeking to ‘combine’ or ‘integrate’ these framing devices might prove to be the downfall of a piece of research that ‘falls between the different stools’. The use of more theories does not equate to deeper forms of theorising and indeed, less could be more. What we need might well be fewer theories but deeper engagement with other forms of practices.

4. Theory, practice and policy

A key area of Lee’s paper focuses on the need for qualitative management accounting research to deliver ‘deliverables’ to practice and policy. Drawing on existing literature he argues that management accounting research in general has failed to adequately influence policy and practice. He describes qualitative management accounting researchers as “followers of practice”, who serve in a role of transcribers, critics and proselytisers. He attributes this situation to a focus on research KPIs and ranking; our approach to communicating qualitative research findings; and our lack of involvement with the professional accounting policy making. He offers a way forward by suggesting that qualitative management accounting researchers can enhance their contribution to practice by ‘transmitting broader, more generally applicable messages’ from their research findings. Here, some form of generalizability is implied, as he calls for “replication, aggregation and refinement of research findings . . .”. This is a little odd as we have long accepted that qualitative work does generalise at an abstract, conceptual level. When [Blumer \(1969\)](#) writes that people react to things based on the meanings that these things have for them, this is a ‘generalising’ statement. The theorist intends this as a characterisation of human behaviour writ large. It is also unclear what forms of ‘replication’ are being advocated. For replication could be about repeating research in all its important detail with the view of establishing analytical objectivity, validity and generalizability; and we struggle to see how such a notion is consistent with the objectives of the qualitative research tradition. Long ago, [Habermas \(1972, 1984\)](#) argued that knowledges may be distinguished by their orientation. A strategic orientation or a technical interest is associated with the positivistic sciences focussed on prediction and control. An intersubjective-contextual orientation/practical interest distinguishes the hermeneutic and critical social sciences. Whilst Habermas’ later work relinquished the earlier, stronger transcendental claims about knowledge-constitutive interests, he maintains a distinction between different forms of rationality (strategic versus contextual) (see [White, 1988](#)) and hence of knowledges that are differently motivated. It seems that Lee wishes qualitative management accounting research to ‘deliver’ utilitarian outcomes and be motivated by a technical, strategic rationality.

We question whether the role of the qualitative management accounting research community is to offer generalizable ‘recipes for success’ for policy-makers and practitioners to adopt/use. Is it to deliver deliverables, whatever these might be? It is difficult to answer yes because the tradition of qualitative work itself has highlighted the socio-historical embeddedness of notions such as ‘success’. What it means to ‘deliver’ is a contingent social construction – there is no transcendental meaning to this term. Our contribution, it seems, is less utilitarian, less focussed on immediate application. How do we contribute – by offering generalising cautionary tales, by challenging current thinking about practice, and by encouraging reflection (the

reflective professional) on practice? Such contributions to practice are not easily quantifiable but they are no less 'useful'. A good example is the qualitative management accounting studies that have focused on accounting and organizational change. These studies have demonstrated that change is often non-linear, luck may play a part, and that what counts as 'successful' change is a product of social processes and many actors – some human and some non-human. They have cautioned against a belief that when things are true, people believe. Instead, research suggests that it is when the people who matter believe that things start to become true (Latour, 1980). These are 'useful' insights for change agents such as reforming managers; alerting them to the power of circulating paperwork and inscriptions, emphasizing the need to analyse connections in action networks, and advising a certain degree of humility in assessing one's individual potency in change projects.

Further, distinguishing between theory, practice and policy is problematic. Theory is a form of practice and practice is infused with theory, however implicit. Ferraro et al. (2005) argue that practitioners see the world through the lenses of social theories and social theories are built borrowing practitioners' categories and meanings. That is, theories do not just describe and/or explain practice but participate in defining and creating practice. For instance, it has been argued that the language, assumptions, and prescriptions of economic theory have had influences on human behaviour and the widespread acceptance of the market mechanisms and its associated bad "management practices" (MacKenzie et al., 2007; Ferraro et al., 2005; Ghoshal and Insead, 1996). That is, theories create the practices they predict and it is for this reason that we say theory is a form of practice. Theory has many 'practical' effects and it is uncertain why one should privilege effects in the 'policy' arena – from whence comes the imperative? Theory, 'practice', 'policy' – each is a field of practice and often they overlap. Similarly, it is not particularly useful to draw tight differences between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' approaches in management accounting research. In the practical world, the qualitative and the quantitative are mutually constitutive and both can be found in all human conduct. For Callon and Law (2005) the quantitative and qualitative simultaneously reside in the material arrangements, systems of measurement and methods, strategies, and tactics that come to represent practical action and it is these practical activities that are of interest.

5. The implications of the current state of affairs for the future of qualitative management accounting research

On the question of what is implied for the future of qualitative management accounting research, we offer three interrelated suggestions.

First, we see a role of active and more focused research training if the qualitative research tradition is to continue to contribute to management accounting knowledge. Students of qualitative management accounting research often muddle their way through what appears to be "a messy and time-consuming affair" (Vaivio, 2008) of fieldwork often without any adequate qualitative research training. Most of the training offered to management accounting students of the qualitative tradition tends to focus on social theory (not necessarily theorising) and data collection methods. It is therefore not surprising that when one engages doctoral students on a conversation, they confidently talk about social theory (e.g., Giddens, Foucault, Bourdieu, ANT, etc.) but struggle to explain their engagement with the field and to articulate their research contribution. Accounting departments, especially those in North America may not offer adequate training on the practicalities of engaging with (and therefore knowing) the field. Insufficient attention may be paid to understanding how images of the field are constructed in the research process; the interplay between research questions, theoretical ideas and field data; and, in fact, knowing what constitute field data. Ahrens and Chapman (2006), and Baxter and Chua (2008), offer interesting insights and training opportunities for doctoral students.

Second, we encourage the qualitative management accounting community to focus on surprises or 'anomalies'. Too often, action that does not fit a general pattern is quickly skipped over but might provide key insights. For example, why do actors point out the inadequacy of a costing technique but continue to actively champion its use? Are they 'dupes' or 'liars' or both? Or do they have "theories-in-practice" that are different from our theories? Adopting practice-focused approach to research provides opportunities for the researcher to learn from these theories-in-practice and hence contribute to management accounting thought and literature. We believe that the qualitative management accounting research community is better placed to take advantage of such opportunities, especially if we improve our understanding of how to engage with the "field". More generally, there are numerous areas in the fields of accounting, finance, economics, etc. that are little understood as fields of practice. Perhaps we could 'deliver' insights into aspects of these; research opportunities exist in many fields of practice apart from that of 'policy'. For example, news commentators have indicated that, particularly during the so-called 'global financial crisis', global stocks markets appear highly emotive places characterized by 'herd' behaviour that does not accord with 'the fundamentals'. Are there regimes of emotions that systematically and significantly affect collective investment decisions? If so, how do we build these factors in our models of valuation? As another example, numerous forms of public accreditation and international benchmarking appear to act as a form of 'global governance' (see Held and McGrew, 2002; Rosenau, 1995). What kinds of effects do such forms of non-state governance have on accounting and organizations?

Finally, if the qualitative tradition is to continue to make contributions to accounting knowledge, we need to improve our understanding of how to theorize the field. As discussed earlier in this paper, there is a struggle with theory and, from our observation, this struggle stems from the treatment of theory as "afterthought". Some researchers within the qualitative management accounting research community treat theory and theorizing as something (or explanation) that occurs after data has been collected and the researcher is out of the field and back to his/her office. Back in the comfort of the office, the researcher then seeks to graft theory onto data that has already been collected; with the view that the theory will help explain the data or at least give their research some semblance of "legitimate research". The consequence of this is that the

researcher ends up with a “forced-fit” or an uncomfortable marriage. For the qualitative management accounting to make significant contributions in the future, we need to actively discuss and (re)engage with the positioning of theory in our research. Our view is that, theory is an integral part of the whole research process and theorizing must start right from when a research idea is conceived and must be part of the research process until when the research outcomes are achieved. This requires that, on one hand, we explicitly recognize and discuss the constitutive relationships between and among theory, research problems and the field; and on the other, put this to practice.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, qualitative management accounting has made some considerable contribution to our understanding of organizational practices of management accounting. Whilst the qualitative management accounting researchers do not offer recipes for success, the cautionary tales they offer and their mode of theorizing the field have practical effects. Seeking to add more theories may not lead to deeper and more innovative modes of theorising. But ongoing engagement with diverse fields of empirical action and stronger research training promise to deliver innovation for the future. Perhaps that is the ‘deliverable’ the community should seek.

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