INTERPRETIVE AND CRITICAL RESEARCH IN ACCOUNTING: A COMMENTARY ON ITS ABSENCE FROM MAINSTREAM ACCOUNTING RESEARCH

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This paper investigates the lack of interpretive and critical research in mainstream academic accounting journals, particularly those published in the United States, and proposes some reasons for this. The term interpretive research reflects a methodological perspective. In a general sense, interpretive research attempts to describe, understand and interpret the meanings that human actors apply to the symbols and the structures of the settings in which they find themselves. Critical research can also be interpretive, but critical research adopts a particular point of view regarding the research question, whereas interpretive research purports to take a 'neutral' stance. Since it is doubtful whether any researcher can adopt a truly neutral stance, we argue that an honest critical perspective is preferable to the dishonest mainstream perspectives and the sometimes less than forthright interpretive is preferable to the dishonest mainstream perspectives. Additionally, we argue that the type of research prevalent in mainstream accounting journals, which is characterized by a positivist methodological perspective and an emphasis on quantitative methods, is incapable of addressing accounting's complex social ramifications. We cite various examples of interpretive and critical research studies which have looked at accounting's role in shaping ideologies, forming political hierarchies, preserving organizational structures and masking conflicts. Disturbingly, we find these journals to be virtually devoid of interpretive and critical research studies. In order to explain why this is the case, we present a framework in which accounting's research domain is viewed as a dynamic, multidimensional, social model. Our analysis reveals the existence of social conflict at the meso-level of accounting research which excludes interpretive and critical studies from appearing in the mainstream journals. Accounting's capacity to create and control social reality translates into empowerment for those who use it. Such power resides in organizations and institutions, where it is used to instill values, sustain legitimizing myths, mask conflict and promote self-perpetuating social orders. Throughout society, the influence of accounting permeates fundamental issues concerning wealth distribution, social justice, political ideology and environmental degradation. Contrary to public perception, accounting is not a static reflection of economic reality, but rather is a highly partisan activity.

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Accounting’s essence can be best understood through its impact on individuals, organizations and societies. Hence, it is important that accounting research make increasing use of interpretive and critical perspectives.

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Introduction

In E. A. Abbott’s *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1952), the reader is introduced to a mythical land (i.e. Flatland) in which the principal character, a perfect square, is jolted from his world of two dimensions into a world of three dimensions. This experience enables the square to view his own world and gain insight regarding its structural shortcomings (e.g. its values, norms, ideologies, mythologies and cultural idiosyncrasies). The square returns to Flatland excited and energized, anxious to enlighten his fellow countrymen on the nuances of his newly discovered truths. Unfortunately, his talk of worlds beyond the two-dimensional parameters of Flatland is viewed as sacrilege and he is publicly humiliated and ordered imprisoned by the High Priests. The scholarly world of accounting research is much like that of Flatland in two respects. First, accounting research paradigms are narrowly focused on instrumentalist and positivist perspectives and quantitative methods. Second, the high priests of accounting research, like those of Flatland, ostracize and punish those whose views differ from theirs.

This is not a new issue. In 1983, Tompkins and Groves observed that:

“The academic accounting fraternity seems to be locked into a myopic view of what research is. It often seems to consider alternative quantitative techniques as the equivalent of the available range of research styles” (p. 361).

Although some would argue that the situation has improved in recent years, Broadbent (1992) indicates that a majority of accounting research continues to follow the mainstream paradigm. The apparent growth in interpretive and critical studies noted by Covaleski and Dirsmith (1990), Roslender (1990), Ferreira and Merchant (1992), and Broadbent and Guthrie (1992) may be attributable more to an increase in the number of academic journals rather than an acceptance of alternative perspectives. As will be shown in this paper, interpretive and critical research is virtually absent from mainstream academic accounting journals published in the United States. As a consequence, accounting researchers who would like to pursue interpretive or critical research are often deterred from doing so and in some cases are actually punished if they pursue such research. Despite these difficulties, many accounting researchers continue to be interested in doing interpretive and critical research, and they have achieved publication success. Laughlin (1995) indicates that this development has led to increased diversity within the accounting research community and has increased the level of tension that exists within the community. We argue that this tension should be viewed as a good thing.
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The Distinctions Between Mainstream, Interpretive and Critical Research

Distinctions between mainstream, interpretive and critical research in accounting were discussed by Chua (1986). Chua indicates that:

“Mainstream accounting is grounded in a common set of philosophical assumptions about knowledge, the empirical world, and the relationship between theory and practice. This particular world-view, with its emphasis on hypothetico-deductivism and technical control, possesses certain strengths but has restricted the range of problems studied and the use of research methods. By changing this set of assumptions, fundamentally different and potentially rich research insights are obtained. Two alternative worldviews and their underlying assumptions may be elucidated—the interpretive and the critical” (p. 601).

Despite Chua’s call for more interpretive and critical research, during recent periods there has been little or no interpretive or critical research appearing in mainstream accounting journals. We will provide some evidence on this point later in the paper; however, for the moment let us note that Lee (1995) reports that:

“...taking the 1991 issues of both The Accounting Review and the Journal of Accounting Research, of 71 papers published, 15% related to analytical model-building, 3% were conceptual or historical, and 82% involved empirical testing of mainly economics-based models, theories or hypotheses” (p. 249).

Laughlin (1995) also discusses the instrumentalist and positivist perspectives that are typical of mainstream accounting research. He contrasts those perspectives with the interpretive and critical perspectives advocated by Chua. Laughlin indicates that instrumentalist and positivist perspectives are characterized by an ontological belief about a generalizable world waiting to be discovered and a high degree of reliance on definable theory with specific hypotheses to be tested, while interpretive perspectives adopt a more skeptical ontological worldview accompanied by ill-defined theories and a lack of prior hypotheses. Laughlin (1995, p. 70) also suggests that critical perspectives can have clear ontological assumptions and well defined theories which run counter to or are critical of instrumentalist and positivist perspectives. The primary distinction between an interpretive study and a critical study being the willingness of the later to take a particular stance regarding the nature and purpose of the research and its political and societal implications.

Classifications of Accounting Research

In order to provide evidence concerning the lack of interpretive and critical research in mainstream accounting we first develop a method for classifying accounting research. To aid in this effort we have adopted certain aspects of Laughlin’s (1995) model for classifying empirical accounting research. Laughlin’s approach builds on previous work by Burrell and Morgan (1979)
and others (see for example Hopper & Powell, 1985; Chua, 1986; and Laughlin & Lowe, 1990). Laughlin classifies empirical accounting research along three dimensions, which include: (1) the level of theory in the methods chosen to pursue the research (i.e. quantitative methods tend to have a high level of theory underpinning them, while qualitative methods tend to have a lower level of theoretical basis); (2) the level of prior theorization (i.e. the extent to which previously developed theoretical models from other disciplines such as economics or psychology provide the basis for the research); and (3) the level of emphasis on change (i.e. in a social sense).

One aspect of Laughlin’s approach which presents some difficulty is that it focuses primarily on empirical research. Since a considerable amount of recently published research in mainstream accounting consists of theoretical mathematical models, we feel it is necessary to modify Laughlin’s approach to add a theoretical dimension. Since Laughlin’s model has three dimensions, the addition of a fourth dimension poses a problem in illustration, therefore, we concentrate primarily on the diagonal of the Laughlin model (see Figure 1).

The diagonal of Laughlin’s model indicates that instrumentalist and positivist perspectives are characterized by a high level of theory in the methods chosen to pursue the research, a high level of prior theorization, and a low emphasis on social change. In contrast, the more interpretive perspectives are characterized by lower levels of theory in the methods chosen to pursue the research, lower levels of prior theorization and medium to low levels of emphasis on change. Thus, the diagonal of the Laughlin model can be viewed as a dimension which extends from the instrumentalist and positivist perspectives characteristic of mainstream accounting research to the more

![Figure 1. Characterizations of alternative perspectives. Source: Laughlin (1995, Figure 2, p. 70).](image-url)
Interpretive and critical research in accounting

Mainstream/interpretive dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empirical/theoretical dimension</th>
<th>Medium to low level of theory in methods (e.g. more qualitative methods). Medium to low levels of prior theorization. Focus on the development of new theories or the critique of existing theories.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level of theory in methods (e.g. quantitative models). High level of prior theorization. Focus on the development of mathematical models.</td>
<td>Medium to low level of theory in methods (e.g. more qualitative methods). Medium to low levels of prior theorization. Focus on the description and interpretation of real world phenomena.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Classification of accounting research perspectives.

interpretive and critical perspectives. For purposes of classifying accounting research in this paper, we have developed an alternative model indicated in Figure 2, which combines the empirical/theoretical dimension with the mainstream/interpretive dimension.

Evidence of a Lack of Interpretive and Critical Research in Mainstream Accounting

After developing a method for accounting research, we then reviewed mainstream accounting journals in order to assess the extent to which interpretive and critical research appears in these journals. It is not a simple matter to define what constitutes the mainstream of accounting research. One approach, which is admittedly flawed, is to define the mainstream in terms of rank ordering of journals. Rankings of academic journals appear on a regular basis in the accounting literature (see for example Schroeder, Payne & Harris, 1988; Hull & Wright 1990; Brown & Huefner, 1994). Brown and Huefner (1994) provide a forthright explanation of the rationale behind these rank orderings:

"Accounting administrators often use journal quality as one indicator of the quality of the research record of a candidate for faculty appointment, promotion, or tenure. University promotion and tenure committees, lacking first-hand familiarity with a candidate’s work, often rely on journal quality indicators and letters from external reviewers as surrogates for research quality. Accounting administrators need to select external reviewers for promotion and tenure cases. Knowing how various journals are received by groups of faculty at well-known schools should be helpful in choosing appropriate external reviewers" (p. 224).

In other words, journal rankings are used to make determinations about promotion and tenure at American universities.
To produce their ranking, Brown and Huefner surveyed the tenured accounting professors at the top forty business schools in the United States as determined by *Business Week's Guide to the Best Business Schools* (Byrne, 1991). The Brown and Huefner survey purports to rank order the quality of 44 accounting research journals (see Brown & Huefner, table 4, p. 236). In order to gain some insight into the extent to which interpretive and critical research appears in mainstream journals, we reviewed all of the papers published during 1995 in the ten journals with the highest rankings in the Brown and Huefner survey.

We classified a research paper as having an *mainstream/empirical* perspective if the level of theory in its choice of methods was high (e.g. the paper used an established statistical method to test an hypothesized relationship between variables measured in quantitative terms), the level of reliance on prior theoretical models was high (e.g. the theoretical model on which the paper was based was derived from an established prior theory, such as those focusing on the rationality of individual decision makers or the efficiency of capital markets; examples would include the capital asset pricing model or Bayesian decision theory), and the level of change choice was low. A paper was classified as having an *mainstream/theoretical* perspective if the level of theory in its choice of methods was high (i.e. the paper focused on mathematical proofs of theorems without recourse to testing of empirical data), the level of reliance on prior theoretical models was high, and the level of change choice was low.

Because there are relatively few papers in mainstream accounting journals which can be classified as either interpretive or critical, we decided to combine these two categories in our classification scheme, even though we recognize that a clear distinction can be made between the two methodological perspectives. Thus, a paper was classified as having an *interpretive or critical/empirical* perspective if the level of theory in its choice of methods was medium or low (e.g. the paper primarily used qualitative research methods), the level of reliance on prior theoretical models was medium to low (e.g. the theoretical model on which the paper was based was not specified or was based on a sociological or political theory which takes a critical perspective), and the level of change choice was high, medium or low. A paper was classified as having an *interpretive or critical/theoretical* perspective if the level of theory in its choice of methods was medium or low (e.g. the paper developed a reasoned verbal argument), the level of reliance on prior theoretical models was medium to low, and the level of change choice was high, medium or low. If a paper demonstrated a high or medium level of change choice it was classified as having a critical perspective. The results of making this classification are shown in Table 1.

**Discussion**

In Table 1, it can be seen that only a small percentage of the research published in 1995 in the journals that we surveyed could be classified as interpretive or critical, and virtually all of that was published in *Accounting, Organizations and Society*. If AOS is excluded, only 1% of the research...
Interpretive and critical research in accounting

Table 1. Classification of Papers in Mainstream Accounting Journals 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Mainstream empirical</th>
<th>Mainstream theoretical</th>
<th>Interpretive or critical empirical</th>
<th>Interpretive or critical theoretical</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Percent interpretive or critical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Accounting Review</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Accounting Research</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Accounting &amp; Economics*</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Accounting Research*</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting, Organizations &amp; Society</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditing: A Journal of Prac &amp; Theory</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Accounting &amp; Public Policy*</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Acc., Auditing &amp; Finance</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Accounting Literature**</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal of Business, Finance &amp; Acctg</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>6.7%***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Review essays discussing mainstream/empirical papers.
*** Less than 1% if AOS is excluded.

published in the remaining journals was interpretive or critical. Focusing on the journals published in the United States, only one contained an interpretive study and that was in the Journal of Accounting & Economics. This single paper was a theoretical essay co-authored by Michael Jensen, who is an acknowledged founder of the positivist perspective in accounting and economics. Although it is not clear, this paper may have been invited by the editors. The only other journal to publish an interpretive study was the Journal of Business Finance & Accounting. This paper was co-authored by Tom Lee, a well known academic of British origin. This may have been an invited paper as well. The point being that even if a mainstream journal publishes an interpretive or critical study, such papers are not likely to be accepted through the normal reviewing process.

Reasons Why Interpretive and Critical Research Does Not Appear in Mainstream Journals

We believe that academic research should be approached with an open-mindedness which enables researchers to seek new knowledge without the risk of ostracism or punishment. It is our view that the interplay of critical and creative inquiry allows researchers to make progress towards understanding a turbulent and complex reality. Unfortunately, the exigencies of academic research are more complicated than this ideal statement would suggest. The editors of academic journals serve as gatekeepers who restrict the types of research that gets published. Our examination of mainstream journals indicates that interpretive and critical studies virtually do not appear. The theory of actor-system dynamics (hereinafter, ASD portrays social systems as being continually subject to change and conflict. As such, these social systems are considered as being constantly in a state of disequilibrium. Reflecting upon the nature of ASD theory, Burns et al. (1985, p. 15) note:

“ASD theory emphasizes particularly human learning, innovation and
Micro-Level: Researchers as social agents

- Individual perceptions and views of reality
- Decision rules for selecting research methodologies
- Intellectual commitments to acquire knowledge
- Personal philosophies of learning and self-transformation

Meso-Level: Social control of research activities

- Academic rules and procedures
- Control of research opportunities
- Exploitation of reward structures to influence conformity
- Barriers to intellectual innovation

Macro-Level: The existing state of scholarly research

- Homogeneity of existing research paradigm
- Lack of innovation in research theories and methods

Figure 3. Academic research as a multidimensional social system: an actor-systems dynamics model (ASD).

creativity in the course of solving social problems. Through such processes, levels of knowledge and the distribution of knowledge among actors change. Rules and principles of social organizations are transformed, and new technologies and practices are developed. These changes alter material and social conditions of human transactions, thus setting the stage for learning and creativity in new contexts.”

An adaptation of the ASD model developed Bettner et al. (1994) is presented in Figure 3. This model depicts scholarly research as a multidimensional social system, encompassing both process and content. The dynamics of the system operate at three interrelated levels: (1) the micro-level (the individual researcher as a social agent); (2) the meso-level (the power structure of the academic profession which consists of the norms, values, interactions and collective behavior among individual researchers); and (3) the macro-level (encompassing the emergent patterns of scholarly research and the greater cultural context in which it is conducted).

The creative talents and insights of individuals which constitute the inputs
at the micro-level ought to produce a variety of outputs at the macro-level. However, the power and control exhibited at the meso-level constricts the development of scholarly thought. Descriptions of these nested social levels will help clarify this model. At the micro-level, the personal values and preferences of individual researchers function to influence: (1) their perceptions of reality; (2) their decision rules for selecting research perspectives; (3) their intellectual commitments to acquire knowledge; and (4) their personal philosophies of learning and self-transformation. Individual researchers possess unique talents, life experiences, personal curiosities, and motivations. Thus, one would expect to find a broad mix of theoretical models and research paradigms at the literature’s macro-level. However, an examination of mainstream accounting journals reveals a homogeneity of research perspectives and methods. How can this be?

A possible explanation of this phenomenon can be traced to the social control and power exerted at the meso-level, where those who control the power structure have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Lee (1995) and Williams (1995) indicate that there is a high degree of control exerted at the meso-level of the academic accounting profession by an academic elite. At this level, powerful forces act to: (1) institute social rules and procedures for scholarly research; (2) control interaction opportunities and create barriers to intellectual interchange; and (3) utilize the university reward structure to maintain control (Lee, 1995). Within accounting’s meso-level, a relatively small group of editors controls a small number of highly ranked accounting journals (Williams, 1995). This makes the likelihood of having an interpretive or critical study published in a mainstream journal extremely low, even if the paper is methodologically sound and well developed. Thus, to maximize the probability of scholarly publication leading to enhanced opportunities for professional recognition, advancement, and mobility, the social norms of the meso-level implicitly require that researchers engage in research which adopts a positivist perspective and employs sophisticated quantitative methods. The output is a stream of research which is remarkably similar and indistinguishable.

The wide variety of inputs at the micro-level ought to produce a wide variety of outputs at the macro-level. What we see instead is a homogeneity of research output which does not reflect the complex social reality in which accounting operates. Interpretive and critical perspectives of this complex reality do not appear. Since it is problematic for the editors of the mainstream accounting journals to admit publicly that they will not accept interpretive or critical research, they explain the exclusion of such research on the grounds that it does not meet the quality standards of their journals. However, because the standard of quality is based on the positivist perspective, the use of quantitative methods, interpretive and critical research is excluded from mainstream journals. Tinker and Puxty (1995) have shown that this assertion regarding a lack of quality is a conscious exclusionary scheme on the part of the editors of mainstream journals.

Even though interpretive and critical research is excluded from mainstream accounting journals, there are other journals that are receptive to such research. Unfortunately, most of these journals are published outside of the
United States and are not well known to members of the US academic accounting community. A question then arises as to whether there may be a cultural peculiarity related to the educational training received by the editor/gatekeepers of mainstream accounting journals. Lee (1995) and Williams (1995) have demonstrated the nexus that exists between educational institutions, the type of doctoral training they provide and control at the meso-level of accounting research. There are two cultural artifacts which perpetuate control of the meso-level by certain elite accounting researchers. First, as previously mentioned, is the dominance of the instrumentalist and positivist perspectives at controlling educational institutions in the United States. Doctoral students in these institutions are rarely encouraged, or even offered the opportunity to explore alternative perspectives\(^5\). Second, in countries outside of the United States where a less explicit linkage between academia and the practicing accounting profession exists, there seems to be more opportunity for the development of interpretive and critical perspectives on accounting\(^6\). Thus, even though the meso-level of accounting research is tightly controlled by the editors of the mainstream journals, the ability of interpretive and critical researchers to have their work published in other journals may form a wedge which will awaken accounting research to an acceptance of alternative perspectives.

The Lack of Interpretive and Critical Research From a Broader Perspective

From a broader perspective, the lack of interpretive and critical research in mainstream accounting may be indicative of a phenomenon that is not unique to accounting, but rather one which pervades the social sciences. Human discourse involves truth-claims than ordinary human discourse. In asserting their truth-claims, many academics, particularly in the United States, have adopted a positivist perspective. This perspective has become the basis for measuring research legitimacy in recent periods. Nevertheless, despite the argument that scientific rigor and the concomitant use of quantitative methods has produced technological advances, it is not clear that this has produced advances in social welfare. Hence there has been a persistent uneasiness in the academic community regarding the inability of these scientific perspectives to adequately address truth-claims in a social arena. The increase in the number of interpretive and critical studies within the broader academic community is testimony to this uneasiness.

Furthermore, there is an issue concerning the role of the scientific ideology in masking social conflict. Tinker (1988) has suggested that scientific ideology is one of the more controversial and most widely debated concepts of the social sciences. He suggests that there are three ideological traits that impinge on the development of the social sciences, namely: (1) an over-reliance on quantitative methods and an underestimation of the consequences of factual indeterminacy (which gives theorists virtually a “free-hand” in interpreting results); (2) an inherently conservative bias that, by naturalizing social phenomena, favors the status quo; and (3) a failure to deal, in a systematic way, with the beneficial interests that promote theorizing. Tinker goes on to discuss what Schumpeter (1954) calls “vision”, asserting that:
“Vision mediates the complex shape of reality and the nature of the problems confronting mankind in any given historical situation and, in the form of ideology, it enters on the very ground floor into the pre-analytical cognitive act.”

Tinker notes that if ideology and values play a pre-analytic role, then it is important to scrutinize the values and ideology behind the theorizing. “Self-scrutiny has not been forthcoming in accounting research because of the widespread, uncritical acceptance of empiricist epistemology” (Tinker, 1988, p. 183).

Criticisms of Mainstream Perspectives

Despite the fact that most academic accountants in the United States focus their attention on research which is characterized by an instrumentalist or positivist perspective, these approaches to research are not without critics. Criticisms typically fall into one of three related categories. First, limitations exist in the fundamental assumptions underlying the research paradigms which adversely affect their ability to provide useful understandings of social reality. Second, while attempting to comply with the strict rigor of the scientific method, mainstream research has placed emphasis on measurement for measurement’s sake. Third, research methods based on the analysis of quantitative data have been so exhaustively employed that they have reached a point of diminishing returns. Each of these criticisms is discussed briefly below.

Limitations of Assumptions

The development and use of theoretical models enables researchers to impose meaning on a complex world. To control for variables not captured in their models, researchers often make implicit and explicit assumptions regarding “how the world works.” For example, Bettner et al. (1994, pp. 2–3) identified five basic assumptions underlying mainstream research in accounting and finance. These are:

“(1) A cause and effect mechanism animates all [economic] activity. Connections exist between initial conditions and final outcomes.
(2) The connections [between initial conditions and final outcomes] are determinable, and if conditions were to be completely specified, which it is in principle possible to do, then outcomes could be predicted with certainty.
(3) The free will of the human being, by and for whom all [economic] activity is undertaken, can be ignored. All relevant human behavior is governed by the cause and effect mechanism.
(4) All [economic] activity can be quantified, and the logic of statistical analysis and inference applies to all measures.
(5) All human beings have equal access to the institutions and systems within which [economic] activity is undertaken.”

While such assumptions may improve a model’s mathematical tractability, they are rarely defensible. As previously discussed, Laughlin (1995) indicates
that mainstream perspectives are based on a high level of prior theorization which is often grounded in neo-classical economics. The use of these theoretical models has been frequently challenged (Tinker, Merino & Neimark, 1982; Tinker, 1984, 1988; Tomkins, 1986; Jensen, 1990; Kaplan & Ruland, 1991; Lehman, 1992). Yet, over a period spanning several decades, the implausible nature of these theoretical models has not been addressed in other than a superficial manner.

Adherence to the Scientific Method

Accounting is a socially constructed and subjective reality. Therefore, the scientific method—wherein relationships among naturally occurring phenomena are assumed to be enduring, quantifiable, and objectively determinable—is an incorrect paradigm that limits the perspectives for doing accounting research. Bettner et al. (1994, p. 4) make the following observation regarding objectivity as it relates to the adherence to the scientific method in accounting research:

"There is a natural tendency for researchers to duplicate the methods of the natural sciences in order to duplicate their successes, but this cannot be done without making the assumption of objectivity implicit in the methods. The implications of this tacit assumption are never addressed. Objectivity also has the appearance of certainty that is missing from subjectivity. It is comforting to believe that measurement is correct or incorrect or that a theory is verified or falsified regardless of who it is making the measurement or testing the theory. With objectivity, we can pretend to ignore the disturbing ambiguity about things that are neither right nor wrong, good nor bad."

We argue that approaching accounting research in a manner similar to a natural scientist is inappropriate and results in distorted abstractions of reality. Mainstream accounting research has ignored alternative perspectives and methods which may be more effective in examining accounting's organizational and societal implications. As a result, accounting research has become a discipline enchanted with methodological rigor and has avoided attempts to develop more interpretive and critical perspectives (Walker, 1989; Williams, 1989; Power & Laughlin, 1992).

Exhaustive Use and Obsolescence

Quantitative databases have become so extensively examined that the value of further investigation has become negligible. Grappling with the "more is better" argument, Campbell, Daft and Hulin (1982) note that the popularity of a particular research paradigm does not necessarily relate to its relative contribution to knowledge. On the contrary, it is often the more innovative and sometimes controversial pursuits that contribute most to knowledge. Perhaps the conservative nature of the accounting discipline makes it fearful of innovative and controversial pursuits. Another possibility is that because mainstream accounting research in the United States is so closely associated with the practicing accounting profession, it has assumed a posture of being scientific and value free so that it does not disturb an important constituency.
The Emergence of Interpretive and Critical Research

The criticisms of mainstream accounting research mentioned above have led many researchers to examine alternative perspectives. While the paths chosen by the individual researchers varies, many have chosen to engage in interpretive and critical studies. For purposes of discussion, we have classified these efforts into three categories: (1) those which argue for an increased use of interpretive and critical perspectives in accounting; (2) those which offer suggestions for conducting such research; and (3) those which provide examples of interpretive and critical research. The following provides a brief discussion of this literature.

The Need for Interpretive and Critical Perspectives

It would be foolish to maintain that there exists one universal theory that effectively explains and predicts all of the social, cultural, and ethical differences observed in our natural and fabricated worlds. In contrast to the confining aspects of the mainstream perspectives, interpretive research is "directed at describing, translating, analyzing and otherwise inferring the meanings of events or phenomena occurring in the social world" (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1990, p. 543). When used in an accounting context, interpretive research enables researchers to examine the metaphorical dimensions of accounting and thereby gain an understanding denied by the more limited scope of the mainstream research perspectives (Hopwood, 1983, 1987; Williams, 1989; Dillard & Nehmer, 1990; Power & Laughlin, 1992).

From a more critical perspective, various accounting researchers have emphasized the importance of increasing our understanding of how accounting is used as a mechanism of control in organizations and society (Tinker, 1986, 1988; Lehman, 1992). Accounting's capacity to create controls translates into empowerment for those who use it. Such power is used to instill values, sustain legitimizing myths, mask conflict and promote self-perpetuating social orders. Throughout society, the influence of accounting permeates fundamental issues concerning the environment, social justice, wealth distribution and political ideology (Merino & Neimark, 1982; Lehman, 1992). Critical researchers have convincingly and repeatedly argued that accounting does not produce an objective representation of economic "reality", but rather provides a highly contested and partisan representation of the economic and social world. As such, the underlying substance of accounting cannot be obtained through an ever more sophisticated elaboration of quantitative methods. Accounting's essence can be best captured through an understanding of its impact on individuals, organizations and societies. Hence, it is important for accounting research to adopt a critical perspective.

Designing Interpretive and Critical Research Studies

While there is growing literature concerning the design of interpretive and critical studies in a general sense, only a small portion of this literature pertains to accounting. Some noteworthy recent exceptions include Hammond and Sikka (1995) on the critical side and Jonsson and Macintosh (1994)
on the interpretive side. In a manner similar to Laughlin (1995), Covaleski and Dirsmith (1990) have proposed a framework for conceptualizing and designing interpretive and critical research on the basis of underlying ontological assumptions. Important to the design of a interpretive or critical study is determining where on the ontological continuum one’s perspective lies. The researcher is given latitude to evaluate his or her view of the social world, define his or her epistemological stance, and select an appropriate methodological approach consistent with his or her social views and epistemological grounding. An important issue that often arises concerning the design of interpretive and critical research is whether it is appropriate to use a mixture approaches in the same study. Some argue that certain methods are only appropriate to certain perspectives (for insight into this debate see Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Others have advocated a blend of research perspectives involving both qualitative and quantitative methods and interpretive and critical approaches (Miles & Huberman, 1984; Kirk & Miller, 1986). These blendings may merely be extensions of, and not alternatives to, mainstream perspectives and therefore should be viewed with caution (Tinker, 1995). We argue that it is important that the researcher’s perspective be made clear so that the reader can understand and appreciate the context in which the research is being approached. It is this frank admission of the researcher’s perspective which is virtually absent from mainstream accounting research.

Examples of Interpretive and Critical Research

Interpretive and critical research studies often do not focus on the same issues that are of interest to mainstream researchers’. Interpretive and critical research considers the broader contexts of the organizations and the societies in which accounting operates. As an example, various interpretive research studies have addressed accounting’s role in framing corporate culture. By examining accounting in the context of its metaphors, rituals, symbols and ceremonies, researchers have gained a more complete understanding of accounting’s capacity to reproduce values, norms, and ideologies, and mask conflicts in organizations and society (Czariawska-Joerges & Jacobsson, 1989; Thomas, 1989; Mills & Bettner, 1992). Other studies have examined accounting’s role in controlling and regulating organizational reality via the imposition of structures (Bettner & Mills, 1989; Dillard & Nehmer, 1990). This structuring aspect of accounting is often viewed from an instrumentalist perspectives as assisting in “the arrangement of people, tasks, and authority to achieve a more calculable and predictable control over organization performance” (Ranson et al., 1980). In contrast, interpretive studies view the structuring aspect of accounting as being more akin to a “template on experience that assists individuals in conceptualizing and dealing with environmental complexities” (Baker, 1977). In this context, structure is viewed as being essentially inseparable from the human mind. An interpretive perspective is required in order to understand the deeper meanings that structures have for human actors.

Research which adopts a critical perspective does not accept that there can be a neutral view of the instrumental uses of accounting to control people in
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organizations. Laughlin’s (1995) model suggests that critical perspectives are characterized by their medium to high level of choice for social change. Critical researchers typically take a stance and are advocates for changes in the status quo. For this reason, critical research is often marginalized to a greater extent than interpretive research. The editor/gatekeepers of the mainstream journals use their power to exclude critical research on two grounds. Firstly, because critical researchers may use qualitative methods, such research may be excluded because of the supposed lack of rigor in the methods. Secondly, because critical researchers are honest in admitting the stance from which they approach their research, the studies are excluded because they are not “objective”. We argue that each of these reasons for excluding critical research is false. Among notable examples of recently published critical studies are Cooper (1995), Sikka and Wilmott (1995) and Mitchell and Sikka (1993). What is exemplary about these studies is their willingness to take a stance against the use of accounting in a way that is exploitative and violative of human values.

In the foregoing we have cited examples from the academic accounting literature where interpretive and critical perspectives have been used to examine accounting’s role in shaping ideologies, forming hierarchies, preserving organizational cultures and masking conflicts. Virtually none of these citations are from mainstream accounting journals. It seems evident that the controls imposed at the meso-level of accounting research by the editors of the mainstream accounting journals has prevented this type of research from appearing.

Summary and Conclusions

It is appropriate to ask, who and what will be better if the concerns expressed in this paper are addressed. We are in a period of history where the established structures of the past are changing. The advanced capitalist societies of Europe, North America and Asia are grappling with the future, but without clear direction. It is hoped that the future will develop in more humane patterns throughout the world, yet it is far from clear that this will be the case. There could easily be an increase in exploitation and oppression instead. At a minimum there will be periods of instability and change. Interpretive and critical studies may open up avenues for exploring ways to facilitate the movement toward a more humane society by breaking down barriers to communication that are erected as a natural by-product of the mainstream perspectives.

Accounting’s capacity to create and control social reality translates into empowerment for those who use it. Such power resides in organizations where it is used to mask conflict and promote self-perpetuating social orders. Throughout organizations and societies the influence of accounting permeates fundamental issues concerning the wealth distribution, social justice, political ideology and environmental degradation. We argue that the underlying substance of these problems can be best viewed through an understanding of accounting’s impact on people. Hence, it is important that accounting research make greater use of interpretive and critical perspectives which are
better suited to understand accounting’s pivotal role in shaping our turbulent society. While we admit that positivist and instrumentalist perspectives have had a significant impact on mainstream accounting research, we argue that there are rigidities and shortcomings to such research. We have provided a framework to discuss why interpretive and critical research studies are absent from mainstream accounting journals. Our discussion of this framework reveals the social conflict at the meso-level of accounting research. This conflict needs to be resolved if more enabling patterns are to evolve at the macro-level. We contend that the power exerted by the editor/gatekeepers of the mainstream journals has been used to exclude interpretive and critical research. Hence, we conclude that mainstream accounting research is really no different than Flatland. In each, the participant’s worldview is bounded by a general inability to conceive of the world as other than it is. This is an unfortunate problem in the mythical world of Flatland. It is a fatal flaw in the realm of accounting research.

Notes
1. These issues do not concern accounting alone. Bettner et al. (1994) discuss similar issues in relation to research in corporate finance.
2. One of the authors of this paper was told by the chairman of his promotion and tenure committee that no interpretive or critical research would be acceptable for tenure purposes.
3. It is interesting to note that, beyond the fact that the methods used to produce these rank orderings are suspect, the journals in which the rankings appear always seem to be near the top of the rankings.
4. We acknowledge the incongruity inherent in one of more recognized organs of capitalistic journalism making a ranking ordering of the quality of academic institutions.
5. Qualifying examinations and course pre-requisites at doctoral institutions in the United States focus almost exclusively on research which adopts an instrumentalist and positivist perspective. The authors are aware of a doctoral student at the University of Illinois who was forced to leave the United States in order to pursue a PhD utilizing a interpretive perspective.
6. For example, there are no specific educational pre-requisites necessary to pursue a professional career in accounting in the United Kingdom. It may therefore be the case that academic accountants in the UK have a freedom to pursue academic inquiry which is not available to accounting researchers in the United States.
7. Bettner et al. (1994) provide examples of interpretive and critical research in the fields of accounting, finance, and economics. Their discussion reveals the use of a variety of research approaches including grounded theory, ethnographic analysis, historical techniques, case study research, and action research.

References
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