

Qualitative accounting research: dispelling myths and developing a new research agenda

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Abstract

This article deals with some common misconceptions about qualitative research. Qualitative studies are well suited to studying complex interconnections and relationships without reducing the complexity to simple numbers or variables. Rather than excluding outliers from a dataset, qualitative researchers are interested in these exceptions and often examine them in-depth in order to develop better understandings and generate new theories on how accounting develops, functions, and influences behaviour. New understandings and theory allow qualitative research to advance recommendations, extend the boundaries of accounting research, and make important contributions to both accounting theory and practice.

Keywords: methods, qualitative, research paradigm

JEL Classification: M40, M41, M42

1 Introduction

Qualitative research plays an important, albeit sometimes misunderstood, role in accounting research. Unlike quantitative research that has become the mainstream of many accounting journals, qualitative research has an important role to play by answering research questions and exploring accounting in ways not available to quantitative accounting research methods. While there are criticisms of both qualitative and quantitative we argue that quantitative accounting research has a valuable role in making contributions to understanding accounting in an ever changing world.

This paper makes several contributions to the accounting research literature. First, by articulating the advantages and characteristics of good qualitative research, which could be useful to qualitative researchers in need of defending their work, both in discussions and in their manuscripts. Second, we inform quantitative researchers how to better understand the advantage(s) of qualitative research approaches. Third, we identify specific qualitative research opportunities. And last, we highlight how both qualitative and quantitative research are important and should go hand-in-hand.

[Chua \(1986\)](#) outlines three research paradigms in accounting: positive, interpretive, and critical. The positive paradigm is most often associated with reductionist quantitative methods, i.e., simplifying something complex into numbers for statistical analysis. The interpretive and critical paradigms are most often associated with qualitative methods where researchers try to preserve the complexity of the material being studied. Mixed methods research can draw from both sides – for example, to corroborate findings, infer causality, provide supporting evidence, or analyze meanings from an opposite perspective. There are also grey areas: studies that defy easy classification into just one paradigm but rather reside somewhere on the continuum in-between. At the broadest level, these paradigms reflect different beliefs about how the world works, the nature of knowledge., and the appropriate methods for gaining new knowledge.

Positivism is a popular paradigm, particularly in the United States where it links with neoclassical economics and neoliberalism, which is closely associated with positivism in that it sees accounting as a neutral part of efficient capital markets ([Roslender and Dillard 2003](#); [Ravenscroft and Williams 2009](#)). Grounded in economic and finance theories, positivist research seeks to provide a rationalist construction of accounting through quantitative methods ([Deegan 2013](#)) where phenomena are evaluated and explained objectively to form generalisable predictions ([Laughlin 2007](#); [Sterling 1990](#)). As explained by the seminal positivist accounting theorists, [Watts and Zimmerman \(1979, 274\)](#), this type of research should provide

...a theory capable of explaining the factors determining the extant accounting literature, predicting how research will change as the underlying factors change, and explaining the role of theories in the determination of accounting standards. It is not normative or prescriptive.

Despite its prominence, the epistemological assumptions of positive accounting theory are not free from criticism. Perhaps the most notable and extensive debate is whether or not accounting is merely a technical function that positivists can study using inferential methods (see, for example, [Ahrens et al. 2008](#); [Parker and Roffey 1997](#); [Alvesson 2003](#); [Christenson 1983](#)). The appropriateness of describing existing accounting practice as support for making normative recommendations has also been questioned ([Sterling 1990](#)).

These concerns provide the impetus for more interdisciplinary research that is willing to embrace both theoretical and methodical pluralism ([Roslender and Dillard 2003](#); [Dillard 2008](#)).

Efforts to legitimise research that departs from the financial or economic framing of accounting have been greatly aided by emerging journals that are dedicated to presenting alternative perspectives on accounting. Examples include *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, *Accounting* (1975), *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* (1988), and *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* (1990). These journals provide a platform for disseminating original research that challenges positivist assumptions and provides interpretive or critical evaluations of accounting as a social construct rather than an entirely economic one.

Interpretivists believe that knowledge and truth emanate from the interaction between multiple and, at times, competing realities. The need for absolute truths, precision, and generalisable findings give way to exploratory studies focused on understanding how and why social actors perceive or understand a phenomenon ([Chua 1986](#)). As a result, interpretive accounting researchers employ different theoretical frameworks and methods to study what [Hopwood \(1987\)](#) terms the ‘accounting craft’: how it develops, is applied, or understood. Most interpretive theories draw from the social and political sciences (see [Gray, Kouhy, and Lavers 1995](#); [Deegan 2013](#); [Parker 2007](#)) and usually rely on qualitative methods to avoid what they see as the reductionist trappings of traditionally positivist techniques ([Ahrens et al. 2008](#); [Broadbent and Unerman 2011](#)).

Critical research also tends to rely on exploratory qualitative methods and is inherently interdisciplinary. Similar to the interpretive tradition, critical theorists draw on a range of sociological theories to explain how society, politics, and economics are inseparable. They aim to challenge objectivist paradigms or generally accepted ‘truths’. The focus is not only on the coalescence of multiple perspectives of reality (as with interpretive research) but explaining the tensions between understanding and practice as part of the process of advancing a normative agenda ([Deegan 2013](#)). As explained by [Roslender \(2006, 250\)](#):

Critical theory is intimately wedded to change. More specifically, it is concerned with the promotion of a better society, one in which the prevailing social arrangements serve the interest of the mass of people, whose “potentialities” are perceived to be constrained by those arrangements already in place.

There has been considerable debate about the legitimacy of the different approaches to accounting research, the type of papers journals should be publishing, and, more broadly, the role of accounting research in contemporary society (for details, see [Roslender and Dillard 2003](#); [Laughlin 2007](#); [Ahrens et al. 2008](#); [Gray and Milne 2015](#)). Rather than seeing interpretive or critical research as the antithesis of positivist research, the three paradigms might be seen as endpoints along a continuum of different forms of academic enquiry ([Dumay 2009](#)). Each offers an alternative perspective and focusses on different aspects of accounting. As a body of literature, these different approaches provide a more complete explanation of accounting ([Broadbent and Unerman 2011](#); [Gray and Milne 2015](#)).

Nevertheless, some accounting journals continue to publish positivist research to the exclusion of almost all else, e.g., *The Accounting Review*. Its most common articles are economics-based archival studies and those using an experimental research design. The same applies to most of the high-profile North American journals and many of the European and Australasian journals, including *Accounting & Finance (A&F)*.

While positivist research plays a key role in furthering our understanding of accounting, it is important to keep in mind that certain research questions cannot be answered using positivist methods. Further, it is not unreasonable to imagine that practitioners gain more immediate and

direct benefit from research that provides practical recommendations. In this context, it is also useful to reflect on how qualitative research can enhance our understanding of accounting and what might be pursued through a qualitative research agenda in a similar way to [Kaczynski, Salmona, and Smith \(2014\)](#) with finance. This special issue of *A&F* speaks to these notions by continuing its tradition of publishing practical, relevant, high-quality research and to supporting the many members of AFAANZ who are qualitative researchers by showcasing their research.

As the opening paper in this special issue we next recognise and articulate the main criticisms of qualitative research (often mentioned by quantitative researchers) and explain how qualitative researchers can contribute to the literature and practice despite these criticisms. We then explain how certain research methods are associated with interpretive and critical research traditions and dispel certain myths. We acknowledge that low-quality qualitative research is sometimes published and explain what characterises good quality qualitative research. We then discuss the research questions that can be answered more effectively by using qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods. This general discussion leads to a more specific articulation of the research questions suited to qualitative methods as part of a broad qualitative research agenda.

2 Criticisms of qualitative research rebutted

Qualitative research continues to face criticism, especially from quantitative researchers. But the source of this criticism might be explained by a fundamental disconnect between the two paradigms because while quantitative researchers attempt to create general rules about how the world works, qualitative researchers seek to explain how the world works in practice and in particular contexts. The famous French sociologist Bruno [Latour \(1999\)](#) saw this as one of the great ongoing controversies in society that continues to this day. Arguably, qualitative researchers can learn much from the rigorous methodology of quantitative research, but the reverse is also true. There is much to learn from immersing oneself in the ongoing milieu of day-to-day work as opposed to analysing mounds of numerical data. Each has their place, and one does not necessarily negate the other. On the contrary, each should complement the other as they both produce unique and useful knowledge. Ironically, the criticisms and controversies surrounding qualitative research incisively frame its benefits.

2.1 Insufficient sample size and use of unstructured methods

Archival studies look for the ‘main effect’, inspired by positivism, which relies on quantitative methods to ensure valid, reliable, and generalisable results. The focus is on general relationships across a large sample and, usually, a regression model is used to test hypotheses about an independent variable given changes in one or more identified drivers. The results are verified through control variables and sensitivity tests to mitigate endogeneity, self-selection bias, and heterogeneity (see, for example, [Michelon, Patten, and Romi 2018](#); [Barth et al. 2017](#); [Green, Taylor, and Wu 2017](#)).

When it comes to sample sizes and the elegance of mathematical modelling, qualitative research appears to fall short. Most qualitative studies involve a limited number of participants (usually between 10 and 30), the majority of whom have been purposefully selected ([for an easy-to-read summary, see Rowley 2012](#)), and the analysis techniques do not rely on statistical significance. As a result, qualitative research designs are sometimes criticised for their lack of rigour and an inability to extrapolate results.

Are these criticisms valid? In a sense, they are equivalent to giving a yellow card to a rugby player for an illegal tackle according to the rules of football. Both games are sports with similar

objectives, but there are also fundamental differences. In the same way, it is unfair to point out the shortcomings of a qualitative research design using rules applicable to quantitative studies.

For example, qualitative researchers do not necessarily seek a large sample with data points from a number of different organisations/settings. More often, their aim is to carefully analyse selected cases to gather as much detail about each setting as possible. Hence, while qualitative research typically involves a large and diverse dataset, quantitative research typically involves a large but specific dataset. Moreover, qualitative researchers can stop gathering data once saturation has been achieved and it is clear that no new insights will be found from analysing more information.

A small sample size or the decision to use a non-quantitative method is a product of the epistemological differences between interpretive or positivist-inspired research. It is not a flaw in the study's design. Some researchers take the position that amalgamating individual experiences explains the functioning of accounting. For these academics, a qualitative method that is flexible enough to 'map' a specific understanding of accounting is preferable to a quantitative design, which may overlook important nuances. An archival method, for example, might be entirely inappropriate in this context since 'outliers' are systematically removed or 'winsorised', and complex interactions among the variables are either controlled or excluded to ensure the model's integrity.

Notably, qualitative researchers sometimes reverse these critiques back on reductionist approaches, claiming they ignore the most interesting examples and oversimplify inherent complexity to achieve statistically significant findings ([Ahrens and Chapman 2006](#); [Brennan and Solomon 2008](#)). Often, it is the outliers that reveal key issues and answers to complex social problems. Interpretive and critical frameworks serve to embrace this subjectivity, non-conformity, and the 'messiness' of the data as a way to explore different perspectives, add to our understanding of accounting, and suggest improvements ([Broadbent and Unerman 2011](#)). Without 'outliers', accounting change would not be possible.

2.2 No p-value reported precludes assessing results

Quantitative studies have the advantage of relying on a p-value (or equivalent) to support conclusions about the data and communicate the statistical strength of a finding. While there are no p-values in qualitative research, this does not mean that it is impossible for a qualitative paper to reach a conclusion with a level of confidence.

As with quantitative studies, a good qualitative paper should explain how the researcher collects data and which methods have been used to generate findings from the data. In other words, qualitative does not mean uninformed or unsubstantiated. In fact, many qualitative papers provide significantly more detail on the steps taken to limit subjectivity in support of their findings. This may be because qualitative studies cannot rely on the assumption that all or most threats to integrity have been mitigated simply because a method is mathematical ([see, for example, Callen 2015](#)).

As explained in Section 2.1, the underlying interpretive or critical framing of many qualitative studies should also be kept in mind. The intention may not be to study a particular outcome or relationship but rather to use detailed examples or illustrations to build on principles, practices, and theory. For instance, a quantitative paper might show that firms with significant environmental impact tend to externally assure their environmental disclosures ([Simnett, Vanstraelen, and Chua 2009](#); [Kolk and Perego 2010](#)) or that they structure their sustainability or integrated reports in a particular way ([de Villiers and van Staden 2011](#); [Barth et al. 2017](#)). In these cases, statistical significance is a useful measure of the correlations among variables.

In contrast, the qualitative researcher examines the reasons behind these generalisations and their implications on accounting practice ([Dumay and Dai 2017](#); [Stubbs and Higgins 2014](#); [Maroun 2017](#); [Atkins et al. 2015](#)). These more conceptually-focused papers are less concerned with measuring a single outcome, and their inherent complexity is not reducible to a single measure of statistical significance. Instead, the reader must consider the method followed to generate findings, the level of detail provided, and the quality of the arguments being advanced.

The pressure to generalise findings leads many qualitative researchers to apologise wrongly for not making statistical inferences given the size of the sample. For example, [Boiral \(2013, 1064\)](#) points out that his “study examined only 23 sustainability reports from two sectors” and that “larger studies, examining more reports from diverse sectors, would make it possible to validate our main findings”. [Boiral \(2013\)](#) incorrectly laments about his small sample even though one can make qualitative instead of quantitative generalisations. Qualitative researchers rely on developing concepts, theory, and recommended practices that are broadly applicable to different settings when generalising. As [Parker and Northcott \(2016, 1101\)](#) explain:

The ability to generalise helps us to recognise connections between our own research findings and other concepts or phenomena that might not be evident at the study-specific, ungeneralised level. It also enables us to translate and communicate those findings across time and space so that their significance transcends the specificity of our own particular study. These key aims of knowledge accumulation and transfer can be seen as having two complementary components: theorising, whereby we connect our findings with those of other studies to enhance theory development and informing practice via identifying general themes or “lessons” that are relevant and useful to practitioners.

It may be helpful to think of qualitative generalisations as an early stage of theorising about a phenomenon to inform future research or normative arguments. Findings from these exploratory studies may then need to be tested using large sample sizes and statistical methods ([Dumay 2009](#)).

A similar argument applies to the popular qualitative case study methodology. According to [Yin \(2014\)](#), case studies are like experiments. They are not a sample from a population or necessarily representative of a larger group and, like any single experiment, generalisation relates to theoretical propositions and not to a statistical population. Therefore, in a case study, the researcher develops analytic generalisations that contribute to and help generalise theories, rather than developing statistical generalisations that develop probabilities.

Positivist researchers use inductive reasoning to accept or reject a hypothesis based on data from a statistical analysis coupled with a p-value to state the reliability of their inferences. Whereas, qualitative researchers use deductive reasoning to form generalisations as findings in themselves. These generalisations are, or at least should be, the outcome of analysing the links between two or more data points to arrive at, in all probability, the most logical conclusion. A simple example of this reasoning is:

All listed companies in Australia are required by the Corporations Act (2001) to produce a publicly-available annual report. The Commonwealth Bank is listed on the Australian Securities Exchange. Therefore, The Commonwealth Bank will produce a publicly-available annual report in 2019.

As with inductive reasoning, the conclusion is predictive but we can never be 100% sure of the outcome. For example, in Australia, the Commonwealth Bank and other financial institutions are subjects in a Royal Commission investigating misconduct in the financial sector. Therefore, if the bank fails to issue its annual report on time, deductive reasoning might suggest the bank is engaged in misconduct and the Board of Directors could not agree on what to disclose. An alternative conclusion might be that the bank does not intend to report at all – unlikely but still possible. Moreover, both conclusions could be wrong, as can any conclusion based on inductive reasoning. However, when using deductive reasoning the researcher aims to create a powerful string of evidence to support a conclusion and thus convince the reader of its merit.

Qualitative researchers also rely on abductive reasoning to generalise, which is a form of deductive reasoning that is used to explain what the researcher observes. In abductive reasoning, the causal linkages are not as apparent as they are in deductive reasoning because many more pieces of data are required to form a conclusion. Here, the qualitative researcher is like Sherlock Holmes solving a murder case based on circumstantial evidence. In the end, the researcher presents data until they reach a point where the conclusion reached is the most likely explanation for the research. As with inductive and deductive reasoning, there is still a chance that the conclusion is incorrect. However, based on the evidence it would be hard to arrive at any other finding.

2.3 No validity and reliability checks

Hand-in-hand with the criticisms discussed in Sections 2.1 and 2.2 is the argument that qualitative research does not rely on formal quality checks. These concerns usually stem from the different understandings of validity and reliability between qualitative and quantitative researchers.

While the quality of both types of research can be affected by drawing incorrect inferences from the data, researchers undertaking studies in the positivist tradition have two primary concerns: the stability of the chosen model and incorrectly or inappropriately extrapolating the results to the sample population. In a qualitative setting, the foci shift. Consistency in the way researchers analyse data is key along with whether the theoretical implications or practical recommendations are explained in sufficient detail and appropriately justified ([Creswell 2009](#)). In this context, qualitative researchers often go to great lengths to ensure the validity and reliability of their findings, explaining their quality safeguards in minute detail. For example, they may document:

- the data collection and analysis process so readers have a clear understanding of how the conclusions were reached;
- the data management protocols used to ensure a consistent approach for collecting and processing data;
- the intercoder reliability checks and repeat the mapping of findings to the dataset to generate consistent and accurate interpretations;
- steps taken to ensure the reliability of the coding/analysis instrument (where applicable); and
- the data collected from different sources to corroborate findings and identify contradictions.

(for details, see [Guthrie et al. 2004](#); [Krippendorff 2013](#); [Creswell 2009](#))

Additionally, with qualitative research, the researcher almost always plays a key role in collecting data – something that is not always the case with quantitative studies in the positivist tradition, as these latter researchers typically obtain their data from databases compiled by

others. Subjectivity, which is a threat to validity and reliability in positivist terms, may be appropriate for interpretive or critical research under certain circumstances, particularly where the aim is to analyse or critique the social construction of accounting. Under these conditions, the researchers' own perspectives can be valuable, perhaps even essential. There is no material threat to validity and reliability provided that researchers present their own ideas transparently and support them with appropriate arguments contrasted against alternative views. Given the nature of qualitative accounting research, transparency is essential.

Preparing financial statements requires professional judgement with considerable variation in the interpretation and application of accounting standards as found in prior research (e.g., [Tremblay and Gendron 2011](#); [Durocher and Gendron 2014](#); [van Zijl and Maroun 2017](#)). Similarly, auditing is far from a completely objective exercise (e.g., [Khalifa et al. 2007](#); [Power 2003](#)). Even finance includes qualitative/subjective aspects as part of the valuation or risk-assessment process (e.g., [Solomon et al. 2011](#); [Porter and van der Linda 1995](#)). As a result, accounting standards require preparers to disclose material assumptions, estimates, and the judgements that underpin financial statements ([IASB 2013](#)). Assurance standards cater to the inherent subjectivity involved when testing balances or with transactions involving estimates ([IAASB 2009](#)). For this reason, key audit matters must be listed in an audit report ([IAASB 2016](#)). Codes of best practice and sustainability or integrated reporting guidelines stress the need for multidimensional reporting and risk analysis that takes qualitative and quantitative information into account ([GRI 2016](#); [IOD 2016](#); [International Integrated Reporting Council \(IIRC\) 2013](#)). Interestingly, practitioners, standard-setters, and investors have acknowledged that 'qualitative' or 'subjective' does not mean unreliable or irrelevant, but the same cannot be said of many accounting academics.

2.4 Just telling a story

Critics often accuse qualitative researchers of emphasising certain aspects of their data to support a particular position or of only dealing with the features of accounting they find interesting. In some cases, this is a valid criticism because there are qualitative studies that are little more than story-telling. However, one could argue that these are poorly designed or poorly executed studies, which is not unique to qualitative research.

Quantitative studies can also be designed badly. For example, omitting a certain control variable may bias the results. Quantitative researchers also have discretion over which aspects of their data to focus on, which to exclude, and how to theorise their findings. Cleaning data or winsorising outliers can skew the data. Finally, quantitative researchers also choose which story to tell through the research question posed, the variables used to represent the underlying constructs, and the selected drivers of variation in the dependent variable.

If appropriate validity and reliability measures are in place, readers of a qualitative study can evaluate the methods used to collect data and its analysis to decide whether or not the conclusions are appropriately substantiated. Care also needs to be taken to ensure the 'story' told supports a theoretical contribution. The context and detail in a qualitative paper are equivalent to the mathematical models of the positivist tradition and serve as an important quality safeguard. Detail does not, however, mean that interpretive or critical papers should be unnecessarily complicated and difficult for their audience to read, which is something some qualitative researchers tend to forget ([Merchant 2008](#)).

3 Qualitative research and methods

There is sometimes debate and confusion about the terms methodology and method ([de Villiers and Dumay 2013, 893](#)). However, as [Guthrie, Parker, and Gray \(2004, 417\)](#) outline, it is quite simple:

Methods are the means whereby one collects and analyses data. Methodology refers to the philosophical issues which underlie those methods.

Unfortunately, the terms method and methodology are often used interchangeably. For example, Yin's ([2014](#)) book, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, uses the term method, while the book advocates a specific methodology for conducting case studies using different methods to collect and analyse data. Conversely, Krippendorff's ([2013](#)) book *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*, calls content analysis a methodology but it is actually a method. Our discussion in this section relates to methods, not methodology.

According to [Broadbent and Unerman \(2011, 10\)](#), one method is not automatically superior to another:

In seeking to undertake accounting research, the approach that is taken by a researcher must adopt methods that are appropriate in the context of that researcher's assumptions about the nature of the social world and the development of knowledge about that social world.

The purpose of the research and the assumptions the researcher makes about the functioning of accounting should inform the method chosen ([Laughlin 2007](#)). In some cases, positivist research methods are well-established and have been shown to produce useful and credible findings over time. Quantitative methods are useful when there are clearly defined relationships between variables and "inter-subjective consensus on translating social phenomenon or economic phenomenon into numerical data" ([Broadbent and Unerman 2011, 11](#)). In other instances, an interpretive or critical approach is required, such as when dealing with complex interrelationships that are difficult (if not impossible) to model or they rely on personal interpretations of facts and circumstances (*ibid.*).

As a general rule, most positivist research relies on quantitative methods, while critical and interpretive research tends to make use of qualitative methods. Over the years, some of these interpretive methods have been adapted from the human sciences for use by accounting researchers. However, a detailed review of these methods is beyond the scope of this paper. Table 1 provides a summary of some of the most commonly encountered methods as a useful starting point for those wishing to experiment with qualitative research.

Table 1: Commonly used qualitative methods in accounting research	
Methods	Summary
Interviews	One of the most common methods involves interviewing research participants. The interviews can be structured, but most are either semi-structured or unstructured to maximise the potential for exploration. Data are analysed using a detailed coding process that is informed by theory, prior research findings, and the researchers' professional judgement. For an easy-to-read overview of qualitative interview methods, see Rowley (2012) and Qu and Dumay (2011).

Table 1: Commonly used qualitative methods in accounting research

Methods	Summary
	Interviews can be conducted independently over a sample or focus on specific groups of individuals depending on the research objective. They are commonly used in single case studies, multiple case studies, and field research (Yin 2014).
Questionnaires/surveys	While less common than interviews, some qualitative researchers use surveys or questionnaires. These would include a range of questions, some of which should be open-ended to capture information in sufficient detail. Questionnaires might also be used to complement data collected from detailed interviews or other sources (Broadbent and Unerman 2011).
Ethnographies	A researcher can collect interesting data when they research inside an organisation as one of its members. Known as participant observation, this method provides a unique vantage point from which to observe how an entity and its employees operate. The researcher can also act as an independent observer. In the non-participant variant of this method, the ideal is to document interactions, experiences, and behaviours without directly engaging the research participants. Those interested in ethnographic studies should find Atkinson, Delamont, and Coffey (2004) to be a useful reference.
Interventionist research	Interventionist research is “based on case study research whereby researchers involve themselves in working directly with managers in organisations to solve real-world problems by deploying theory for designing and implementing solutions through interventions, and analysing the results from both a theoretical and practice perspective” (Dumay and Baard 2017, 267). See also Baard and Dumay (2018) .
Content analysis	This method “involves codifying qualitative and quantitative information into predefined categories to derive patterns in the presentation and reporting of information. Content analysis seeks to analyse published information systematically, objectively and reliably” (Guthrie et al. 2004, 287). Content analysis has been a predominant method for examining change in sustainability and integrated reporting. It can also take the form of archival analysis where the researcher examines the content of different sources over an extended period of time. Further, it has also been used to analyse images, audio, tone, and diction as a type of communication or discourse analysis (Tregidga, Milne, and Kearins 2014). For a complete understanding of the theory and design of content analysis, we recommend reading Krippendorff (2013) . Dumay and Cai (2015, 2014) provide a critique of its use and contributions to accounting research.
Reviews of the prior research, structured	Synthesising collections of work has become increasingly common as the number of papers dealing with specific aspects of accounting

Methods	Summary
literature reviews, and conceptual papers	<p>has mushroomed. These reviews are a useful summary of key findings and an important reference for readers unfamiliar with a particular area of research (see, for example, Parker 2005; Gray, Kouhy, and Lavers 1995; Dumay et al. 2016; Massaro, Dumay, and Guthrie 2016).</p> <p>There are also examples of papers that deal with accounting at a largely conceptual level. These often outline the theoretical underpinnings of accounting and are useful for both qualitative and quantitative researchers seeking to theorise their findings or position their work as part of a broader research agenda (see, for example, Hopwood 1987, 2009).</p>

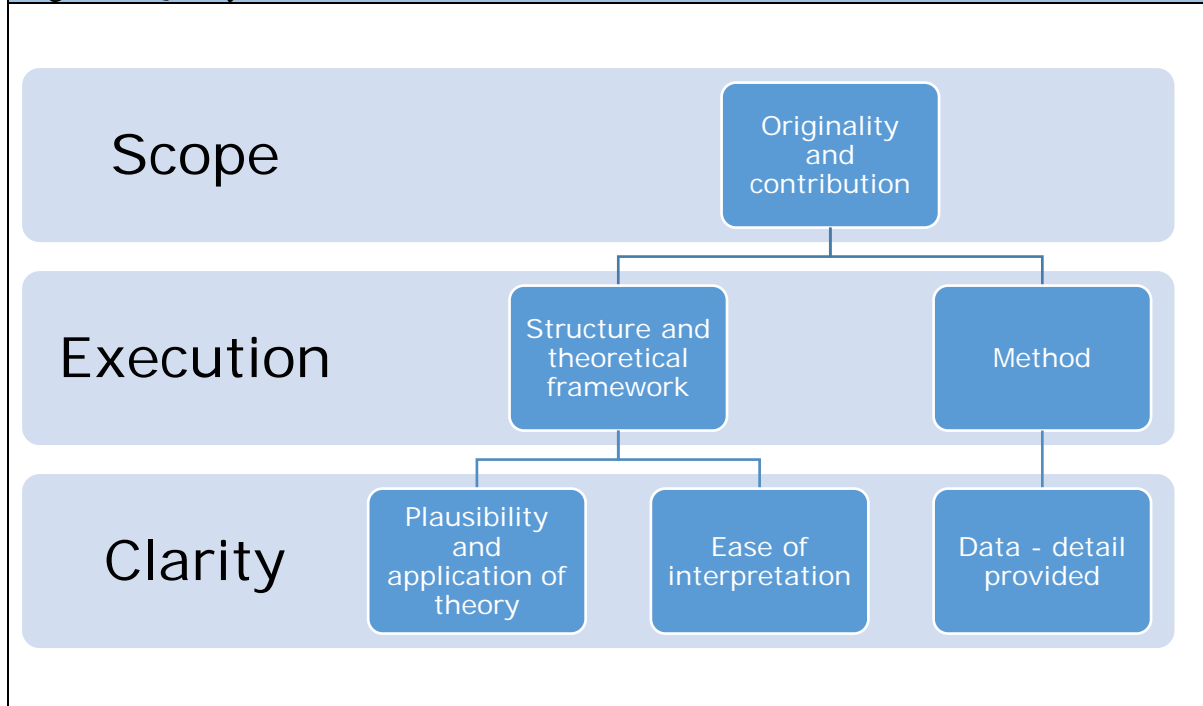
A common feature of the methods in Table 1 is their strong exploratory focus. The aim is to collect detailed information to aid in understanding a phenomenon and question the status quo rather than to extrapolate findings or predict outcomes. The methods also take cognisance of the importance of context. In both data collection and analysis, researchers must consider the prevailing social, political, and economic forces at work. They cannot simply accept assumptions as taken-for-granted or introduced in quantitative/positivist studies to simplify statistical models. Consequently, qualitative papers may rely on multiple methods and multiple sources of information to ensure that important nuances, similarities, and contradictions are not overlooked.

Qualitative methods are not easier to use simply because they do not involve complex mathematics and large datasets. Qualitative research can be difficult to structure and report, especially because the researchers cannot rely on a statistical analysis to make their case. A qualitative paper must provide a coherent and convincing argument – something that can take time to achieve. Additionally, data collection often involves direct engagement with human subjects. For example, gaining access to research participants can be daunting. Carrying out a longitudinal study requires carefully managing and maintaining the researcher’s network of possible participants ([Alvesson and Deetz 2000](#); [Dumay 2010](#)). In addition to the time and patience involved in collecting and analysing data, there are also ethical issues to consider, such as privacy rights and laws on data retention.

4 Characteristics of good qualitative research papers

Figure 1 shows an overview of the characteristics of high-calibre qualitative research. It could be argued that these attributes apply equally to both qualitative and quantitative research. But the information presented is based on the experiences of the authors rather than from a detailed review of the literature and, therefore, is simply offered as a useful tool for those interested in engaging with qualitative research. The figure is structured, but we must remember that the research process is fluid, and a paper’s contributions often deviate from the original scope as new insights are serendipitously discovered ([Serenko and Dumay 2017](#); [McCay-Peet and Toms 2015](#)). Hence, the order in which each component adds to a paper may not be as linear as this tree structure suggests.

Figure 1: Quality characteristics of research



A paper's scope should be the starting point of any quality analysis. Even the most carefully executed research using the most advanced method is unlikely to have an impact if the study's rationale is unclear. To this end, the aim of the research or the research question should be explicit. Further, the paper should make a valid contribution to the literature. The contributions could be at the empirical level where, for example, unique data or important evidence is used to support or refute previous research findings. Often, the contribution is theoretical, for example, extending a theoretical framework, showing how a theory is operationalised in different contexts, or proposing a different theory to explain observations. Perhaps the most important aspect of good qualitative research is the study's practical relevance. Unlike quantitative/positivist research, interpretive and critical studies do not always shy away from being normative or prescriptive. As a result, qualitative researchers may want to provide a critique of existing practice and propose recommendations for new ways of doing things ([see, for example, Linnenluecke et al. 2015](#)).

Execution and clarity both involve methods. As explained by [Broadbent and Unerman \(2011\)](#) and [Granlund and Lukka \(2017\)](#), academics can fall into the trap of choosing a method because it has been used extensively in the past or it conforms to positivist research traditions. But the method needs to be appropriate for the research question. For example, qualitative researchers frequently use semi-structured interviews, but this approach may not offer the same level of detail as an ethnographic design when the objective is to observe changes in behaviour or practice. Similarly, a questionnaire or survey may be a good tool for collecting descriptive data or generating preliminary findings but probably lacks the exploratory potential of one-on-one interviews (see Table 1).

Once an appropriate method is selected, execution becomes important. Researchers should document the measures taken to ensure the data was collected and processed in an accurate and consistent manner. As explained in Section 2.3, documenting the research process is important for addressing validity and reliability concerns because the reader must have a clear understanding of how the data are being used to draw any inferences or support

recommendations. The aim is to demonstrate that the methods followed to reach a conclusion are sound, the data analysis is transparent, and the findings are credible. Yin's (2014, 45) summary of reliability in case study design applies broadly in qualitative research:

The general way of approaching the reliability problem is to make as many steps as operational as possible and to conduct research as if someone were looking over your shoulder. Accountants and bookkeepers always are aware that any calculations must be capable of being audited. In this sense, an auditor also is performing a reliability check and must be able to produce the same results if the same procedures are followed. A good guideline for doing case studies is therefore to research so that an auditor could in principle repeat the procedures and hopefully arrive at the same results.

The selection of data is also key to a good quality study. Even though qualitative research is not concerned with the adequacy of the sample to extrapolate findings, there are still important considerations when it comes to selecting data. For example, the reliability of any finding can be compromised if the researcher overlooks bias in the respondents, relies on participants who are too far removed from the phenomenon under review, or does not corroborate key findings with data from other sources.

The next consideration is the paper's structure and theoretical framework. Many qualitative studies seek to extend theory. For example, they provide more nuanced explanations, develop new or refined models, or offer alternative explanations for observed findings. While results may not be generalisable in a positivist sense, a qualitative paper can also identify core principles that might be broadly applicable in other contexts or settings (Parker and Northcott 2016). Thus, to achieve these objectives, a qualitative paper must be structured to create clear links between theory, data, and findings.

Most quantitative papers follow a generally accepted format. The prior literature is presented first and used to develop propositions, followed by results that either support or reject a null hypothesis. Qualitative studies do not necessarily follow a fixed layout. Although, a good quality paper will provide an overview of the theoretical framework, explain how the theory was used in the research context, and offer data to support any resulting conclusions or recommendations. Without these essential features, qualitative research runs the risk of being difficult to interpret, and readers would be justified in questioning the plausibility of the results.

Finally, we touch on the relationship between theory, method, and data. In quantitative studies, hypotheses are developed based on a pre-selected theoretical position, and data are then collected to support the statistical analysis. A qualitative study can follow a similar approach but, as the research becomes more interpretive or critical, a clear distinction between data collection, how the method has been applied, and how a theory is mobilised becomes less relevant.

For example, qualitative research may begin by taking a particular theoretical position, which informs the choice of method and data but, as data are collected and analysis proceeds, the chosen theoretical framework may need to be revised and new data from alternative sources may need to be collected. Analysis might also demand a different method as unexpected insights emerge (Serenko and Dumay 2017; McCay-Peet and Toms 2015). Alternatively, data may be collected about a phenomenon before a particular theoretical or methodological position is taken to avoid restricting the study's exploratory potential. We do not advocate for any one approach. The point is that qualitative research is a flexible process guided by the need to explore, challenge assumptions, and expand theory. A bounded or structured approach to

selecting theory and applying different methods is not a prerequisite for a well-designed qualitative study.

5 The types of research questions that suit qualitative research methods

This section sketches out the broad areas of research typically addressed by qualitative accounting research and discusses prevailing notions like: 1) Qualitative research is suited to examining complex causal relationships, such as sustainability. 2) Underlying theory emanates from the social sciences in keeping with the belief that context is important to how social actors use and react to accounting. 3) Qualitative research is suited to examining social change and new contexts.

Qualitative studies are well suited to investigating possible relationships or interactions among variables in the absence of an established body of prior research or an easy-to-predict cause and effect relationships. Examples include:

- How professional accounting firms secure legitimacy and use their financial reporting expertise to expand into other areas of corporate reporting and consulting ([O'Dwyer, Owen, and Unerman 2011](#); [Dillard 2011](#)).
- How accounting systems can be used to alter practitioner behaviour ([Miller and O'Leary 1987](#); [Cowton and Dopson 2002](#)).
- How individuals respond to new accounting and auditing prescriptions ([Durocher and Gendron 2014](#); [Tremblay and Gendron 2011](#)).

For quantitative researchers, accounting and auditing are mechanisms designed to lower agency costs and facilitate the flow of capital. By contrast, interpretive tradition draws heavily on sociological theory, political science, and behavioural psychology to debunk the view that accounting is a neutral information processing system. Analyses often focus on detailed illustrations at the micro-level to show how accounting can alter perceived realities, develop in unexpected ways, and construct new fields of visibility ([Hopwood 1987](#)). This is a line of research that particularly complements other streams of inquiry surrounding standard setting, such as the implications of political power ([Bengtsson 2011](#); [Ravenscroft and Williams 2009](#)), institutionalised environments ([Deegan 2013](#); [Power 1994](#)), and well-entrenched discourses and heuristics ([Murphy, O'Connell, and Ó hÓgartaigh 2013](#); [Power 2003](#)).

Interpretive research also plays an important role in mapping or conceptualising organisational change, particularly when the pathways to change are complex and difficult to model or empirically test. [Laughlin \(1991\)](#) is an excellent example. This paper provides a conceptual framework for explaining how companies respond to external events or shocks with either temporary or high-level changes (first-order change) or more far-reaching second-order changes that affect business processes, systems, and strategies. The framework has subsequently provided a useful basis for other qualitative researchers to document and explain how and why companies respond to changes in the corporate reporting environment (see, for example, [Gray et al. 1995](#); [Stubbs and Higgins 2014](#); [Guthrie, Manes-Rossi, and Orelli Rebecca 2017](#); [McNally and Maroun 2018](#)). A related body of work explores how organisations unaccustomed to regulation reorient their operations when introducing accounting systems ([Broadbent and Guthrie 1992](#); [Broadbent, and Laughlin, 1997](#)).

In the corporate governance and sustainability space, qualitative researchers play a key role in identifying important social and environmental issues and providing organisations with insights on how they should be managed and reported ([de Villiers and Hsiao 2018](#)). For example, the interpretive accounting community has devoted considerable attention to

explaining how integrated reporting can be used to reinforce an organisation's social, economic, and environmental objectives ([Gibassier, Rodrigue, and Arjaliès 2018](#); [Vesty, Ren, and Ji 2018](#)); engage more effectively with stakeholders ([Lai, Melloni, and Stacchezzini 2018](#); [Lodhia 2014](#)) and promote a more integrated approach to business management ([Al-Htaybat and von Alberti-Alhtaybat 2018](#); [Guthrie, Manes-Rossi, and Orelli Rebecca 2017](#)). In concert, there have also been critiques of integrated reporting that offer recommendations on how to improve the guidelines or their practice ([McNally, Cerbone, and Maroun 2017](#); [Dumay et al. 2017](#); [du Toit, van Zyl, and Schütte 2017](#); [Brown and Dillard 2014](#)). As explained by [Broadbent and Unerman \(2011, 15\)](#):

When social and environmental dimensions are coupled with the financial dimensions flowing from an organisational strategy, decision, or action, a much more complex situation is highlighted. This added complexity requires a range of different methods to analyse and provide substantive insights related to many of the issues. Some of the issues can be investigated through use of positivistic methods drawing on large-scale quantified datasets, such as the reaction of share prices to the publication of additional social and environmental sustainability disclosures. However, the range of issues in sustainability accounting amenable to study through positivistic techniques represents only a small fraction of the novel accounting-related issues and problems in sustainability management that urgently require solid research evidence.

An example of this type of novel research is interpretive research that deals with emerging forms of accounting and corporate reporting. For instance, two recent special issues in *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal* provide a normative review of existing environmental accounting practices. [Russell, Milne, and Dey \(2017\)](#) propose an ecological accounting framework, while ([Atkins and Maroun 2018](#)) recommend an extinction accounting framework for combating habitat destruction, climate change, and loss of species. Similarly, [de Villiers, Rinaldi, and Unerman \(2014\)](#) and [Rinaldi, Unerman, and de Villiers \(2018\)](#) provide an overview of integrated reporting trends, a critique of existing reporting conventions, and an agenda for future research on how to realise the full potential of integrated reporting. A final illustration is the collection of normative work that explores the benefits of having integrated and sustainability reports assured and advancing normative recommendations for standard-setters and practitioners grappling with the technical challenges of testing non-financial disclosures ([Maroun 2018](#); [Cohen and Simnett 2015](#); [Simnett and Huggins 2015](#)).

In summary, the above examples illustrate the application of what [Laughlin \(2007\)](#) refers to as 'middle range thinking'. Here, accounting theory is not being tested against a dataset per se. Rather, theory is being mobilised to provide a framework for exploring nuances in practice, questioning the status quo, and advancing new ideas about how accounting could be functioning. Qualitative studies are essential when dealing with complex and subjective subject matters that cannot be reduced by mathematical models or empirically tested without losing important details. They are also invaluable when the objective is to explore actual practice as a way to highlight the socially-constructed nature of accounting or debunk taken-for-granted assumptions in the hope of promoting positive change. In this way, qualitative research has a key role to play as an integral part of the interpretive and critical accounting movement that seeks to enhance our understanding of accounting and offer alternative perspectives on the status quo.

6 A research agenda for qualitative accounting research

As outlined at the beginning of Section 2, the juxtaposition between qualitative and quantitative research need not be destructive. They can, in fact, complement each other. As [Dumay and Rooney \(2016\)](#) argue, the polemic between numbers and narratives can be productive and produce new knowledge. This does not need to “unfold battlelike, with opposing supporters and detractors who are intent upon vanquishing each other” ([Chua 1995, 115](#)), but rather each should investigate the problems it is appropriate for.

In accounting research, a vast range of questions can be explored using qualitative research methods because qualitative research does not rely on database coverage or focus on the economics of an agency problem. In qualitative research, these two criteria could lead to data in search of a question ([Carlin 2018](#); [Ohlson 2015](#)) instead of the other way around. Qualitative research also allows for developing new understandings and theories. These new understandings and theories have the potential to inform further research – both qualitative and quantitative. For example, prior archival studies may have reported the main effects of capital markets, i.e., the overall associations found in large samples. However, those studies may have overlooked important differences within certain sub-samples, or may not have controlled for factors considered to be important drivers of the phenomenon being explored. Therefore, we provide direction regarding some specific areas qualitative research can usefully explore, before concluding

6.1 Opportunities for future qualitative accounting research

A qualitative study relies on appropriate data and theory to develop accounting concepts, principles, and practices ([Salmona, Kaczynski, and Smith 2015](#)). However, rather than focussing on statistical generalisation, the emphasis is on drawing conclusions about particular contexts.

For this reason, qualitative accounting research is particularly suited to examining how accounting influences particular members of society and how they influence accounting. Thus, qualitative research methods can be deployed to examine how accounting influences employees in the context of, say:

- work-life balance
- working conditions
- employee satisfaction
- employee commitment
- employee compensation
- the likelihood of employees to circumvent controls
- the likelihood of employees shirking their duties
- the likelihood of employees considering fraud

Of course, employees are just one group within society. The same sort of questions can be asked about other groups in society. For example, how is accounting used by, or used to influence:

- boards of directors
- customers
- suppliers
- senior management
- executive compensation
- auditors
- the government

- tax authorities
- environmental pressure groups
- assurance providers
- investors
- banks
- reserve banks
- regulators
- the accounting profession
- insurance companies

Each of the bullet points above can be expanded in a similar fashion to the discussion on employees that preceded it. For example, qualitative research methods can be employed to examine how and why the Board of Directors influence accounting and how and why they use accounting to monitor and influence managers, their own compensation, their own prospects for re-appointment, etc. Similarly, qualitative methods can shed light on the use of accounting to influence boards or their effectiveness in monitoring and influencing strategy.

Qualitative research could also examine important questions relating to efforts by the accounting profession to:

- reserve work for their members;
- restrict entry into the profession to artificially raise income levels for members;
- complicate accounting rules to raise income levels for members;
- complicate audit requirements to raise income levels for members;
- restrict the entry of minority groups into the profession;
- assist the powerful to maintain their dominance in different contexts, e.g., capitalist, communist, or deist; and
- ensure the quality of the work performed by their members.

In addition, to the corporate context and the accounting profession, there are many other settings in which to explore these same issues using qualitative methods, such as:

- not-for-profit organisations
- charitable organisations
- public sector organisations
- state-owned enterprises
- social enterprises
- religious organisations
- local communities
- families, among others.

Overall, we could ask: Why we should restrict our inquiries to the effects of accounting on investors or a manager's choice of accounting methods when there are so many other interesting questions to explore? Similarly, why should we restrict our questions to those that can be answered using readily-available numerical data when there are so many interesting questions that relate to complex individual interpretations of how accounting should be used and what it should be used for?

6.2 Longitudinal studies

Qualitative research often uses in-depth interviews to collect data, reflecting the interest in how social actors interpret causality in their work environment. Insights can be enhanced by focusing on changes in conditions, facts, and circumstances. Interviewees might be asked how things changed in the past, but retrospective accounts typically suffer from memory bias.

Additional insights and more valid results can be gained by re-interviewing at a later date ([Yin 2014](#)). Rather than relying on subsequent rationalisations by the interviewees, the researcher is in a position to more objectively observe changes in perspective ([Qu and Dumay 2011](#)). That said, these approaches are time-consuming and can be costly. In addition, participants may not be around for the full duration of the study for a range of reasons, but archival analysis of documents may provide a practical solution to overcoming some of these drawbacks.

The aim of longitudinal studies is to provide a better understanding of how dynamic contexts affect the subject matter at hand. A strategy to reconcile the imperative of maintaining a steady research output with a wish to conduct a longitudinal study could be to complete a set of interviews and produce a paper, and then to return to the study at a later date to complete a set of follow-up interviews that could provide the longitudinal perspective on the same, or different, research questions ([see Dumay and Rooney 2011](#)).

6.3 Different data sources, research methods, and theoretical perspectives

[Hoque, Covaleski, and Gooneratne \(2013, 1172\)](#) state that triangulation through “the deployment of multiple theories and or research methods” to study a phenomenon, is often overlooked as an opportunity to gain new insights. In addition, the validity and reliability of qualitative research can be enhanced by using different sources of data and a variety of methods to collect and analyse data (including those outlined in Table 1) ([Yin 2014](#)). A combination of methods, as well as theoretical pluralism, can ensure that salient issues are identified, key findings are corroborated, and alternative constructions of accounting are advanced.

To identify the salient issues, studies grounded in the interpretive or critical traditions, the emphasis is not on precise measurements or regression models. Quantitative researchers aim to uncover the ‘average’ associations in a population, but qualitative researchers are more interested in specific examples of good, bad, or even ugly practice ([Baard and Dumay 2018](#)) to better understand the underlying causes. Qualitative studies can therefore make important contributions to knowledge precisely because they engage with the ‘outliers’ that quantitative methods often exclude. By studying the exceptions, qualitative research can provide alternative perspectives on well-studied phenomena and advance new ideas to apply, contribute to, and develop accounting theory on different levels ([Llewelyn 2003](#)).

Relying on multiple data sources demands care in research design and execution to ensure validity and reliability ([Yin 2014](#)). In parallel, an appropriate method or methods must be chosen based on the research question, the data available and the study’s broader objective ([de Villiers and Dumay 2013](#)). In some cases, adding quantitative data to a qualitative study in a mixed-methods approach can improve its credibility ([Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007](#)). Similarly, qualitative data can enhance quantitative studies by corroborating findings from tested a hypotheses or determining the drivers within a relationship through practitioner interviews, and so on.

[Giddens \(1984, 287\)](#) argues that it is not the debate between the qualitative and quantitative camps that is at issue. Accordingly, it is not a methodological question but rather a question of the number of cases to be analysed. A small number of cases usually requires qualitative methods, while a large number of cases needs quantitative methods, and mixed methods are found in-between ([Dumay 2009](#)). However, [Giddens \(1984, 333\)](#) also argues that quantitative data is a derivative of qualitative data because, when defining labels for quantitative data, we have the same hermeneutical problem as when defining labels for qualitative data. By abstracting data using labels, we are also abstracting the detail behind what is presented by the researcher to the reader. It is only when we use a rich descriptive approach to present the

findings of a small number of cases do we see the trees in the forest. When we use positivist quantitative methods, we only ever see the forest.

6.4 Opportunities to investigate new accounting phenomenon

Qualitative researchers are not limited to phenomena that can be measured and studied at arm's length. In fact, qualitative researchers are scientists willing to explore those aspects of accounting, organisations, and society that might be too unstructured or messy for researchers rooted in the positivist paradigm ([Laughlin 1995](#)).

Interpretive or critical research explores accounting practices by expanding the frontiers of accounting research, by critiquing and developing theory and laying the foundation for future quantitative studies to test newly discovered interconnections and relationships. At the same time, qualitative research must be practically relevant, not distanced from practice ([Tucker and Lowe 2014](#)). There is often too much focus on theoretical development and methodological preferences, which likely results in a contribution the professional community overlooks ([Parker, Guthrie, and Linacre 2011](#)). Qualitative researchers must ask important questions, challenge the status quo, and develop both theory and practice.

New accounting phenomena are constantly being introduced. Some more recent examples relate to the impacts of economic, social, and environmental sustainability – especially climate change – and how corporations disclose and report on their related activities to investors, policymakers, and wider society ([Alrazi, de Villiers, and Van Staden 2016](#)). What we are witnessing is a relative explosion of mandatory and voluntary reporting and disclosure frameworks as society demands more than just financial accounting information from companies ([Bartels et al. 2016](#)). The plethora of frameworks available for reporting social and environmental sustainability and other forms of non-financial information makes it difficult for companies to decide which is the most relevant to use ([de Villiers 1999](#)).

Unlike financial accounting with its mandatory reporting frameworks, companies are still free to cherry pick which social and environmental framework(s) to use and when to use them. Quantitative/positivist accounting research has taken on the role of attempting to understand whether these frameworks do provide more reliable information to investors. Do these frameworks result “in efficient and productive capital allocation” or “act as a force for financial stability and sustainability”? ([IIRC2013, 1](#)) Or, do they truly promote social and environmental sustainability? ([Flower 2015](#)). It seems the role of quantitative accounting is more relevant for understanding the ostensive financial implications of all forms of accounting and accountability for companies and markets, while qualitative research's role is the critical and performative assessment of the wider social and environmental implications of these constructs ([Dumay, Guthrie, and Rooney 2018](#)).

6.5 Conclusion

This paper rebuts the main criticisms of qualitative research and explains how qualitative researchers can contribute to theory and practice. We then explain how certain research methods are associated with interpretive and critical research traditions and dispel certain myths. We explain what characterises good quality qualitative research. We then broadly outline the type of research question which can be answered more effectively with qualitative, rather than quantitative, methods; followed by a more detailed articulation of the research questions suited to qualitative methods.

This paper makes several contributions to the accounting research literature. First, by articulating the advantages and characteristics of good qualitative research, which could be useful to qualitative researchers in need of defending their work, both in discussions and in

their manuscripts. Second, we inform quantitative researchers how to better understand the advantage(s) of qualitative research approaches. Third, we identify specific qualitative research opportunities. And last, we highlight how both qualitative and quantitative research are important and should go hand-in-hand, and not be opponents in a battle for supremacy.

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