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# Investigating highly established research paradigms: Reviving contextuality in contingency theory based management accounting research

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### ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical analysis of the potential implications of adopting a highly established research paradigm in management accounting research. The analysis employs the notion of uncertainty as it is presently used in established contingency-based management accounting (CBMA) research practice. We argue that particular established constructs and measurement instruments dominate the research practice of that field in a paradigmatic manner. Consequently, the constructs and measurement instruments of uncertainty tend to be continuously reproduced in a similar, taken-for-granted manner that does not question their validity. Furthermore, as some of the findings regarding uncertainty in existing CBMA research are mixed, we suggest an alternate path for conducting contingency-based research in management accounting and illustrate this with a field study from the drug development business. The analysis presents an emic inclusive alternative for conducting CBMA research that could complement the currently prevailing etic dominated research, thus significantly widening the current scope of such research. The suggested alternate path for CBMA research is faithful to the original ideas of the early contingency scholars and argues for the opening up of institutionalised research practices in this field of management accounting research. Currently, the situation in CBMA research exemplifies the problem of an institutionalised paradigm actually hindering fruitful development within the research field. Hence, the paper is essentially a critique of the overly mechanistic employment of established research practices, such as those evident in CBMA research.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents a critical analysis of the implications of adopting a highly established research paradigm in management accounting (MA) research. This analysis is conducted by employing the notion of uncertainty as it is used in established contingency-based management accounting (CBMA) research practice. We define CBMA as an approach to management accounting research that seeks to understand how the operation and effects of management accounting are not universal, but depend on the contexts within which it operates (e.g. Hall, 2016) and will focus on the *research practices* enacting such approach to MA research. We argue that particular established constructs and measurement instruments

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dominate the uncertainty field of current CBMA research practice in a paradigmatic manner. Consequently, the constructs and measurement instruments of uncertainty that have been used in previously published contingency research tend to be continuously reproduced in a similar and taken-for-granted manner that does not question their validity. In fact, their usage seems to be regarded as a necessary feature in CBMA research that addresses uncertainty. Currently, it is standard practice to explicitly justify employing established constructs largely based on the fact that they have previously been successfully employed by others. While this can be regarded as exemplifying the well-known functional effects of paradigms – it certainly fosters efficiency in academe – it simultaneously also demonstrates its downside as researchers potentially overlook the potential problems of institutionalised research procedures. While this paper only examines this question with regard to uncertainty in the context of contingency theory (CT), we argue that similar issues can occur with regard to other relevant fields and concepts within MA.

To indicate that there are alternatives to established research practices, we suggest another path for conducting CBMA research – one that would be faithful to the original ideas of the early contingency scholars and would imply opening up the current box of the institutionalised research practices in CBMA.<sup>1</sup> How this kind of path could be made real is illustrated by using one of the central contingency variables, uncertainty, as an example and by conducting a field study in the drug development business. Suggesting such an alternative path is partly motivated by the fact that some of the findings regarding uncertainty in the existing CBMA research are mixed. In addition to suggesting and illustrating such a new path, we also suggest that the current situation in CBMA research exemplifies one whereby an institutionalised paradigm might actually hinder fruitful development paths in its research field.

This paper is essentially a critique of the overly mechanistic employment of established research practices, such as those currently evident in CBMA research. To demonstrate this problem, this paper examines the design and application of prevalent constructs and measurements of uncertainty, specifically perceived environmental uncertainty (PEU) and task uncertainty (TU) within the institutionalised research practice of CBMA. In order to consider the mixed empirical results in this field of research (e.g. [Chapman, 1997](#); [Chenhall, 2003](#); [Hartmann, 2000](#)), the paper problematises the validity of these constructs as generic measures of uncertainty. Based on a field study, the paper also offers an example of how uncertainty can occur in the everyday life in the drug development business. The results suggest that using the emic domain, for a long while largely neglected in CBMA research, could provide new avenues for meaningful contingency research and could potentially help to shed light on some of the mixed findings in prior research. The direction that we suggest is comparable to [Rousseau's \(1979\)](#) proposition for moving from the 'closed-systems approach' to the 'open systems approach' – in the sense that the input side in the typical CBMA research models of today are largely taken for granted, regarding the key constructs and their measurement instruments. Such a direction in contingency research would also imply a move from the management control systems perspective towards a more thorough consideration of management control practices, but while retaining the original ideas of CT.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to note, recognising the worries of [Otley \(2016\)](#) regarding how little cumulative knowledge CBMA has managed to produce, that in our view CBMA does not necessarily need to lead to any linearly cumulative knowledge accumulation for CT type of research to be meaningful. The self-evidence of targeting to knowledge cumulation is part of modernism (e.g. [Montagna, 1997](#)), but there is no necessity to tie CBMA self-evidently to such philosophical position – it just has happened to become taken for granted over a long period of time within the CBMA program. Whilst such necessity has likely become assumed in the currently established practice of CBMA research, the key original ideas of early CT research (still echoed in the typical definitions of CBMA, e.g. [Hall, 2016](#)) do not necessitate such conclusion, but instead allow for a more liberal and open understanding of what meaningful scholarly work applying CT could involve. [Otley's \(2016\)](#) comment captures the notable challenge of targeting cumulative knowledge: "This is perhaps because it [CBMA] has (implicitly) set out to produce knowledge of a type which may not exist in the complex and changing world of organisational control" (p.55). As the fragility and instability of the world has notably increased since the original CT studies of the 1960s, we suggest relaxing such strict demand for CBMA research and believe the inclusion of the emic aspect into the research practice of CBMA becomes ever more appropriate in this light: It can help in capturing the complexity and changefulness of the world, saving the core idea of CBMA research, even though its established research practices likely need critical re-evaluation.

The study takes advantage of fieldwork conducted in the pharmaceutical sector by analysing the process of product development from molecular discovery to qualified end product. Faithful to the idea of interpretive research, we accessed the emic realm of the case organisation, a small drug development company, to understand the meaning and evolution of uncertainty in its everyday operation ([Ahrens & Dent, 1998](#); [Kakkuri-Knuuttila, Lukka, & Kuorikoski, 2008](#)). Following the core idea of pragmatism, we sought to discover the manner in which the members of the target organisation actually worked and coped with uncertainty; for instance, the methods by which they believed this critical issue might be managed (e.g., [Lukka & Modell, 2010](#); [Lukka, 2014](#)). Letting the contingencies of organisational life emerge – as they were perceived by the people themselves (cf. [Chapman, 1997](#)) – allowed us to bypass the potentially questionable, if not even misleading, belief that

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that although early contingency research emerged and advanced through particular empirical studies and with certain construct and measurement choices, it did not attempt to dictate the employment of any particular kind of research procedures as being the only correct ones (e.g. [Burns & Stalker, 1961](#); [Galbraith, 1973](#); [Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967](#)). The institutionalisation of the rather fixed constructs and measurement procedures occurred over decades in CBMA research – a process beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> This paper echoes the recent 'practice turn' in management and accounting research (see e.g. [Ahrens & Chapman, 2007](#); [Whittington, 2006](#)).

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