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It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it? Of method and madness☆

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ABSTRACT

This short essay takes the opportunity presented by the paper by Patten (2015)[1] to enter the debate concerning the relative pros and cons of quantitative versus qualitative research methods. Too often, this is a sterile 'debate' and in accounting especially, the actual lack of real debate is destructive – manifest as it is in the pernicious attachment of key academic journals to a single (and largely unexamined) notion of what comprises good research and consequently what is permitted as knowledge. This restriction has additional unanticipated consequences in that it (a) refuses to acknowledge research findings that appear in journals other than those anointed by the high priests of self-styled positivism and (b) it severely limits the research questions that can be addressed to only those which can be perceived and addressed through a narrow array of method (Chua, 1986). We argue that such a position is untenable as well as undesirable and, following Feyerabend and Morgan (as well as Caldwell, McCloskey and Tashakkori & Teddlie), argue for pluralism in method choice grounded in a pragmatic philosophy driven firstly by a concern for the research problem, and an absence of a fact-value distinction. We suggest that such pluralism is especially important in an area concerned with social and environmental issues which, ultimately, are matters of life and death and more important than trivial matters of 'which method is best' (or perhaps – more accurately – which method is permitted in journal X).

1. Introduction

> "... It appears increasingly clear that analytical sophistication and the playing of statistical games have become the overriding obsession of researchers in the area [of social and environmental accounting] and hence such studies, rooted as they are within the prevailing economic and political status quo, can be largely considered as exercises in irrelevance as far as advancing the SEAA agenda is concerned" (Owen, 2008b, p. 27)

☆ The title is a loose attempt to echo the famous 1930s song "T'ain't What You Do (It's the Way That You Do It)".

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[1] It is appropriate to note at the outset that the paper to which we initially responded was a statistical re-testing of the conclusions of Dhaliwal, Radhakrishnan, Tsang, and Yang (2012). That paper was to act as a straw man to which we might respond. Patten's initial straw man, however, turned into a snowman as it melted away to be replaced by the present (excellent) piece now appearing as Patten (2015): thus requiring that many of our original comments and criticisms were revised, revisited and some removed. The loss of such specificity raised the risk that our comments would become either too general or less insightful and less acerbic. We have attempted to overcome this challenge but without assuming a wide reading of the more mindless, typically North American, main journal "empirical" publications parading as superior knowledge of corporate social responsibility accounting.

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It is a truism – almost facile in its obviousness – that evaluating anything requires some means by which to evaluate it, some criteria against which to assess it. Evaluating research and scholarship is notoriously difficult (see, for example, Black, 1993; Worthington & Hodgson, 2005) not just because of the impossibility of articulating a simple judgement on such a complex activity – let alone the impossibility of making any sensible measurement of the activity itself (Hofstede, 1981) – but, most obviously, because of the diverse range of criteria against which it might be judged (see, for example, Humphrey & Lee, 2008, p. 1). But, of course, the criteria we choose are likely to depend, to a fair degree, upon the extent to which we address – and how we then answer – the broader question of 'what are we for?'. It is not just that such a question is largely what gives our scholarship meaning but also as we sit in our comfortable, molly-coddled and largely undeserved self-absorption, we should not escape, we would argue, the notion that our privilege brings with it an equivalent level of responsibility. That responsibility is, it seems to us, to seek to address the most important of the problems that we perceive and which may fall within our purview and ability (Fogarty, 1998; Lee & Williams, 1999; Sikka, Willmott, & Puxty, 1995). And it is what we determine to be important that gives meaning and purpose to our research (see, for example, Jones, Galvin, & Woodhouse, 2000) and, arguably, to our lives. These arguments hold especially strongly for social, environmental and sustainability accounting (Owen, 2008a, 2008b).

The reason why such concerns are so crucial to research in social, environmental and sustainability accounting (SEA hereafter) – as, indeed they are in corporate social responsibility (CSR) and the whole sustainability and business "debate" more widely – is that the field can be (on the face of it at least) so profoundly trivial. It remains so superficially trivial unless one can place the theorising, the empirical work or the normative imagination around SEA into some broader social, environmental, political and/or moral context. Any research process that creates an artificial distinction between 'facts' and 'values' in such a context, we would argue, seems patently absurd, if not downright outrageous.

The triviality of SEA has been widely remarked upon (e.g. Spence, Husillos, & Correa-Ruiz, 2010). The practice of social, environmental and 'sustainability' disclosure is so patently spasmodic, partial, incomplete and selective; it so obviously tells everybody virtually nothing about the actual social, environmental and sustainability impacts of the organisation or even anything about its 'social and environmental performance' (whatever that is); and most profoundly it fails to discharge anything that might look like accountability. Indeed, it is not even obvious that investors (let alone investment analysts) take anything other than the most marginal of risk signals from it (see, for example, Campbell & Slack, 2008, 2011; Chan & Milne, 1999; Murray, Sinclair, Power, & Gray, 2006). With a relatively few notable exceptions, SEA disclosure appears to only make any sense at all as a relatively minor element in the organisational arsenal of legitimation, corporate preening and narcissism, perhaps signalling,[2] stakeholder management, boundary management and so on. There is no immediate empirical reason why such SEA might commend itself to our attention more than do (say) the dietary habits of board members, changes in photographic techniques or the reading habits of speculators.

Equally, there seems little evidence that SEA in an internal management accounting context fares much better. Although within organisations SEA has slowly become more integrated with other mechanisms such as environmental management systems (see, for example, Schaltegger, Bennett, Burritt, & Jasch, 2008) it is not at all obvious that even environmental accounting is that widely practised. Equally, it is not at all obvious that environmental accounting is crucial to organisational functions, at least not beyond the broader concerns of risk management.

And yet there at least three senses in which SEA is anything but trivial.

First, the total volume of activity – however hollow it might be – thought of as SEA in annual report disclosure, in the construction of stand-alone reports, in the formulation of policies and institutions, in the phenomenon of assurance and related 'standards', and in the sheer effort to avoid it substantively entering the legal requirements of organisational functions, is very far from insubstantial (see, for example, Hoffman & Ehrenfeld, 2013). This alone commends itself to our attention as the world of practice quite transparently considers this apparent schizophrenia well worthy of its efforts and resources.

Secondly, whilst it would be very difficult to provide formal evidence of a conscious volition (or perhaps even conspiracy), the steadfast refusal by business, accountants and politicians to engage with any notions of substantive accountability and/or sustainability accounting is genuinely arresting. Indeed, it goes further and there is clearly an absolute refusal to even consider the issues substantively. These refusals speak volumes to us if we have the ears to listen.

Thirdly and consequently, as Owen (2008b) so eloquently demonstrates, any SEA that was substantive and which avoided capture by capitalism and managerialism would be profoundly disruptive of current hegemonic narratives – those both within and without the academy. A substantive SEA would probably demonstrate that corporate claims for 'social responsibility' and 'sustainability' were vacuous at best and pernicious and destructive lies at worst. It would probably show that no company of any size (at least in the Western world) had made a profit (however defined/measured) once social and environmental matters (i.e. negative externality costs) were factored in; it would probably expose the idea that large companies *cannot* be either responsible or sustainable (Bakan, 2005; Milne & Gray, 2013). It would probably clarify that the profit of companies is, more often than not, a combination of the appropriation of the wealth (and lives) of others, a source of inherent inequality and a result of using (i.e. destroying) capital (environmental and social) and claiming it as income. In short, something akin to a giant Ponzi scheme. It would show, most clearly, that we live in a world of dishonesty, oppression and madness.

[2] But to whom and what remains distinctly vague.