

# DOING QUALITATIVE RESEARCH OF PHENOMENOLOGY IN ACCOUNTING

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## ABSTRACT

*Accounting as social construction and social practice will be more interesting when explored with qualitative approaches. However, accounting became more complex and had different meaning in every context and more important to know how social actors use and react to accounting. The paper offers types of research questions appropriate to qualitative research methods, and opportunities to investigate new accounting phenomena. Using pathway approach for qualitative research, especially using phenomenology for accounting issues, made researchers have another alternative to choose research methods in phenomenology to do their qualitative research. The results showed using this approach for qualitative research of phenomenology can direct researchers to finding answers when using qualitative research as their first steps. Second, this pathway approach can be traced to find notions in accounting areas as social construction. Qualitative research-pathway in phenomenology can be used as one of many tools for qualitative research when everybody starts for qualitative research. This pathway still can be discussed based on other context research even still using same phenomenology methods. This model can enrich methodology in phenomenology for accounting researchers.*

**Keywords:** Qualitative, Phenomenology, Pathway, Accounting.

## INTRODUCTION

Accounting as a social construction and social practice will be more desirable if it is explored with a qualitative approach. The application of accounting practices will have implications for individual behavior and the functions of organizations and society (Burchell et al., 1980; Potter, 2005). Accounting practice is described as an objective, loyal, and impartial reflection of organizational reality. There are phenomena that are represented in financial terms in the report and are considered objective. Qualitative research has an important role to play by answering research questions and exploring accounting in ways not available for quantitative accounting research methods (De Villiers et al., 2019). Meanwhile, in many accounting practices that are not fully understood, or ignored by everyone (Potter, 2005). Qualitative accounting research has a valuable role in contributing to understanding accounting in a changing world. Although qualitative research is sometimes misunderstood, it is in accounting research. This is because the mainstream of accounting research uses quantitative research.

The branches of phenomenology are varied and growing. Researchers are given the freedom to determine the methodology to find answers to the study. The method does not automatically superior to anything else (Broadbent & Unerman, 2011). Here, researchers choosing to use phenomenology certainly considers the flow of logical thinking in the phenomenology methodology. This line of thinking will lead researchers to find answers and make their research have new and unique methods. As a purpose of this article, this study

offers types of research questions appropriate to qualitative research methods, and opportunities to investigate new accounting phenomena. By using the pathway model for qualitative research, especially using phenomenology for accounting problems, makes researchers have another alternative to choosing research methods in phenomenology to carry out qualitative research.

## **ACCOUNTING AS SOCIAL PRACTICE AND THE CHANCE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

Research on accounting as a social and institutional practice usually begins by looking for and exploring accounting from a broad perspective, then investigating the application of accounting practices in the social and organizational contexts in which they occur (Potter, 2005). Such studies show that accounting is easier to understand as a dynamic and socially constructed practice. Even to the point where researchers argue that there is no '*natural*' or '*fixed*' domain to which accounting practice should or should not be applied. This accounting domain is usually in the form of attributes of the application of accounting practices in a context. The application of accounting practices will have implications for individual behavior and the functions of organizations and society (Melançon, 2014; Salamon, 2018).

Accounting theorists have also looked to themselves with accounting as a linguistic tool, exploring how this language has been developed and applied in certain cases. Researchers in this area have considered accounting for its rhetorical dimensions, identifying rhetorical images that appear to support accounting regulations and practice. One view that researchers have identified describes accounting reporting and practice as a means of measuring preexisting '*economic reality*'. Such a view, which is often inherent in accounting standards and theoretical guidance statements, describes accounting practice as an objective, faithful, and impartial reflection of organizational reality. In it, only the phenomena represented in financial terms in the report are considered objective while the various allocations, classifications and other human interpretations that are evident in many accounting practices are not fully understood or are ignored.

Finally, viewing accounting as a social and institutional practice also creates a need to understand how the domains in which accounting practices are applied are shaped and reconstructed (Salamon, 2018). Work carried out from within this perspective can also inform our understanding of professionalization activities in the field. Typically, accounting converts the physical flows of an organization into financial flows. In doing so, accounting creates a particular area of economic accounting where judgments can be made, actions or justified policies drawn up and disputes generated and resolved (Salamon, 2018). This appreciation of the accounting domain has also given rise to research that can be classified into two categories, namely: studies that focus on the implications of changing accounting domains, and research that examines the processes through which domains can change in certain settings.

## **TYPES OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS APPROPRIATE TO QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS**

Accounting as a social practice can continue to be explored to explain how the meanings appear for the development of science. The next step after qualitative research in the management discipline and field research is completed; the researcher faces several challenging questions (Tucker & Schaltegger, 2016). Questions such as how should these actions and events be understood? How are organizational structures and processes described? The standard response to these questions is to "*put some theory*" into these

organizational problems. Theorization (or conceptual framing) is the “*added value*” of qualitative academic research.

For phenomenology research perhaps the most promising opportunity for researchers to advance the phenomenological approach is to review the work of Alfred Schultz (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). Schultz develops a sociological framework based on phenomenological concepts, synthesizing the work of Husserl and Max Weber (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

Interpretive research also plays an important role in mapping or conceptualizing organizational change, especially when the pathways of change are complex and difficult to model or test empirically Table 1. The interpretive accounting community has devoted a lot of attention to explaining how integrated reporting can be used to strengthen an organization's social, economic and environmental goals (Salamon, 2018). It also investigates more effective engagement with stakeholders (Lodhia, 2015) and promotes a more integrated approach to business management (Guthrie et al., 2017).

Elements of	Husserl's Descriptive	Phenomenology Interpretive Heidegger's
Method of	Reduction through epoche and bracketing	Hermeneutics
Purpose To	purify / free from everyday assumptions	Dasein's which mean the existence of being-ontology
Principles of	Search for essence (eidetic reduction)	Self and the world become one in one unit, Dasein'
Result	Essences the foundation for all the knowledge and other phenomenological methodologies based on his work, sharing his aim to describe this essence.	Phenomenology Dasein is hermeneutics in the original meaning of the word, which refers to the work of interpretation

Qualitative studies can make an important contribution to knowledge because they are involved with situations of outliers that are often excluded from quantitative methods (De Villiers et al., 2019). By studying exceptions, qualitative research can provide alternative perspectives on well-studied phenomena and advance new ideas to apply, contribute to, and develop accounting theory at different levels (Llewelyn, 2003). Based on Melançon, (2014) suggestion that it is necessary to explain the selection of phenomenological studies in qualitative research that is in accordance with each type. The right selection will determine the strategy for conducting research in the field, determining the methods and samples needed. To make it easier, it requires a research path, this path will be useful for qualitative research enthusiasts in conducting studies Table 2.

In other cases, an interpretive or critical approach is needed, 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 (Broadbent & Unerman, 2011). The best of all things considered: Over the years, some of these interpretive methods have been adapted from human science for use by accounting researchers (De Villiers et al., 2019). Interpretivists believe that knowledge and truth derive from interactions between multiples and, sometimes, competing realities. The need for absolute truth, precision, and general findings paved the way for exploratory studies that focus on understanding how and why social actors perceive or understand phenomena (Chua, 1986). Consequently, interpretive accounting researchers use different theoretical frameworks and methods to study what (Hopwood, 1994) term 'accounting craft': how it develops, is applied, or understood. Most interpretive theory comes from social and political science and typically relies on qualitative methods to avoid what they see as the reduction pitfalls of traditional positivist techniques (Ahrens et al., 2008; Broadbent & Unerman, 2011).

Qualitative studies are particularly suitable for investigating possible relationships or interactions among variables in the absence of established prior research or predictable cause and effect relationships. Examples include:

1. How professional accounting firms secure legitimacy and use their financial reporting expertise to expand into other areas of corporate reporting and consulting (Dillard & Roslender, 2011; O'Dwyer et al., 2011).
2. How accounting systems can be used to change practitioner behavior (Cowton & Dopson, 2002).
3. How individuals respond to new accounting and auditing prescriptions (Durocher & Gendron, 2014).

### **OPPORTUNITIES TO INVESTIGATE NEW ACCOUNTING PHENOMENA**

Phenomenology as a methodology in social research can be used in accounting. The use of phenomenology is based on accounting as a form of social construction and social practice, which includes still very much knowledge that need to be excavated or discovered. Phenomenological philosophy has informed various leading concept in the study of organizations, including social construct (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Phenomenology researcher accounting field researcher creation argue with individuals and organizations (Gill, 2014). Accounting becomes more complex in every context in which social actors have an interaction with members of their own in their social environment. Phenomenology will be useful for exploring how social actors use and react to accounting specifically examining complex causal relationships and for examining social change and new contexts (De Villiers et al., 2019). The unit of analysis in phenomenology can be an individual, dyad, group or organization (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Interpretive or critical research explores accounting practice by broadening the boundaries of accounting research, by critiquing and developing theory and laying the groundwork for future quantitative studies to examine newfound interconnections and relationships. At the same time, qualitative research must be practically relevant, not far from practice (Tucker & Lowe, 2014). There is often too much focus on theoretical developments and methodological preferences, which is likely to result in contributions being neglected by the professional community (Parker et al., 2011). Qualitative researchers must ask important questions, challenge the status quo, and develop theory and practice. New accounting phenomena are continuously being introduced. Some of the more recent examples relate to the impacts of economic, social and environmental sustainability - particularly climate change - and how companies disclose and report their related activities to investors, policymakers, and the wider public (Alrazi et al., 2016).

A qualitative study relies on appropriate data and theory to develop accounting concepts, principles and practices (Khan, 2014). However, rather than a focus attached to statistical generalizations, the emphasis is on drawing conclusions about context (Javed & Zhuquan, 2018). For this reason, qualitative accounting research is well suited for examining how accounting affects certain members of society and how they affect accounting. According to (De Villiers et al., 2019), qualitative research methods can be used to test how accounting affects employees in a context, such as:

- work-life balance
- working conditions
- employee satisfaction
- employee commitment
- employee compensation
- the possibility of employees avoiding control
- the possibility employees neglect their duties
- the possibility of employees considering fraud.

Furthermore, employees are only one group in society. The same type of question can be asked about other groups in society. For example, how accounting is used by, or used to influence:

- the board of directors
- customers
- suppliers
- senior management
- executive compensation
- auditors
- government
- tax authorities
- environmental pressure groups
- guarantee providers
- investors
- banks
- reserve banks
- regulators
- professions
- accounting

A study suggest that each of the above points can be expanded in a similar way to the discussion about previous employees. De Villiers et al. (2019) Qualitative research can also examine important questions relating to the accounting profession's efforts to: 1). restrict entry to the profession to artificially increase income level for members; 2). complicating accounting rules to raise income level for members; 3). complicate audit requirements to increase member income level; 4). limiting the entry of minority groups into the profession; 5). helping the strong to maintain dominance in a different context, for example, capitalist, communist or deist, and; 6). ensure the quality of work performed by its members.

In addition, for the context of the company and the accounting profession, there are many other settings for exploring the same problem using qualitative methods, such as: 1). Non-profit organizations charity; 2). Organizations public sector organizations 3). State-owned enterprises; 4). Social enterprises; 5). Religious organizations; 6). Surrounding communities; 7). Family, among others.

Moreover, in order to provide a direction for future phenomena-based accounting research, this study offers a pathway to clarify the stages for further research in conducting phenomenological qualitative research in accounting studies Table 2.

<b>Research Pathways</b>	<b>Choice</b>	<b>Scholar</b>
Type of Research	Qualitative	Burrel & Morgan (1979); Chua (1986); Neuman (2014)
Research Paradigm	Interpretive	Burrel & Morgan's (1979); Chua (1986); Neuman (2014)
Methodology Research	Phenomenology	Hussler (1900); Heidegger (1962)
Types of Methodology	Interpretive or Critical	Schultz (1962); Ihde (1991)
Phenomenology Philosophy	Hussler & Martin Heidegger (interpretive Phenomenology) Merleau-Ponty, Pierre Bourdieu (Critical Phenomenology)	Gill (2014); Neubauer et al., (2019) (Salamon, 2018)
Kind of Phenomenology	interpretive phenomenology	Gill (2014); Neubauer et al., (2019)
Method phenomenology	Phenomenology interpretive Analysis (IPA) Descriptive Phenomenology Analysis (DPA)	Bonner & Friedman (2011); Giorgi (2011); Robert (2013); Gill (2014),
Method developer	Jonathan Smith (IPA) Amedeo Giorgi (DPA)	(Smith, 1996) (Amedeo Giorgi, 1994)
Key concepts of	IPA using double hermeneutic, idiographic, inductive DPA using Bracketing (epoche), Eiditic reduction, imaginative variation and meaning units	Gill (2014) (Smith, 1996) (Amedeo Giorgi, 1994)

## CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

This study highlighted the accounting subject as a social construction. The topic of this paper is relevant for scientific research in accounting. Clearly, this research confirms that proportionally applying quantitative and qualitative research in different fields of science can contribute to higher levels of knowledge and better understanding of different phenomena. In this context, accounting is part of social science and must also be considered using a comprehensive approach, not only as a practice, but also as a scientific discipline with a theoretical background and its correlation with other business segments. In that context qualitative research is also important in the field of accounting. The main objective of this paper, is to offer types of research questions appropriate to qualitative research methods, and opportunities to investigate new accounting phenomena. In addition, this study offers a pathway to clarify the stages for further research in conducting phenomenological qualitative research in accounting studies. In this regard, a direction for future phenomena-based accounting research was also outlined.

Judging from some of the added value of this paper, this study contributes theoretically by systematically analyzing the relationship between accounting as a scientific subject, and as a social construct. Furthermore, for practical purposes, using adequate philosophical elaboration, this paper can contribute to enriching the business literature. The study findings consider accounting as a social practice and qualitative research. The findings offer some practical examples of qualitative research in several areas of accounting. For example, qualitative research methods can be used to examine how and why boards of directors influence accounting and how and why they use accounting to monitor and influence managers, their own compensation, their own prospects for reappointment, etc. Likewise, qualitative methods can explain the use of accounting to influence boards or their effectiveness in monitoring and influencing corporate strategies.

As limitation, this paper only provides a conceptual pathway for conducting qualitative research using the Phenomenology methodology. Thus, there are many other ways to be able to do qualitative research in accordance with the context and phenomena that arise in the environment.

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