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Making Accounting Matter

A Study of the Constitutive Practices
of Accounting Framers

Charlotta Bay

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Abstract

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The idea of accounting as a constitutive means, making people think and act in particular ways, is well established in the social strand of accounting literature. In professional organisations, for example, accounting is claimed to be critical to processes of turning people into rational and responsible economic actors. However, this thesis refocuses the empirical attention away from the organisation and into the private sphere of people's everyday financial lives. As this is a field partly inhabited by people who for various reasons are believed to have difficulty in making sense of financial accounts, a dilemma arises regarding how to influence people's way of managing their own finances by means of accounting information. How this dilemma is assumed to be resolved in order to make accounting matter is the query of this thesis.

Through a study of four cases, the thesis investigates the practices of public authorities, a television makeover show, and a pension insurance company – here referred to as accounting framers – whose task it is to construct accounting in such a way so as to make it come across as important, relevant and useful to various groups of the general public. By examining how people's accounting interpretations are elaborated in order to make them responsive to financial accounts, the thesis contributes to problematising the constitutive role of accounting and the conditions believed to enable it to turn people into financially responsible actors.

Keywords: constitutive role, interpretation, accounting framer, private sphere, identification/design practices, representation, social construction

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To my darling boys

A Word of Gratitude

I take the last sip of my coffee, lean back, and close my eyes. I have just reached the final page of the yellow book lying in front of me on the sofa table. In the darkness of my closed eyes, I sigh and just enjoy a silence I had almost forgotten. There have been so many voices over the years, accompanying the writing of the letters on these pages. Voices belonging to people to whom I owe the deepest gratitude today.

First and foremost, there is this strong one. Impressively allowing, but still demanding. And with a sense of presence beyond comparison. The voice of my supervisor, Professor Bino Catasús, is of course the one to whose pitch I have paid the closest and most thorough attention, and from which I've learned to appreciate the tune of 'street-smart' whistling and love of critique. And it is to the sensitive remarks boosted by questioning frowns and encouraging nods made by Gustav, Thomas, Maria, Sabina, Fredrik, Gunilla, Andreas, Niklas, and all of you others in the Musica research group, along with Professor Fredrik Nilsson and a bunch of wonderful colleagues in Uppsala, urging me to write and re-write and write again that I have finally and at last managed to turn this thesis into what it is today.

But as I so stubbornly try to express in this book, there is more to life than work. And it is thanks to those familiar but yet invaluable sounds of my everyday life that I have managed to endure: the outstanding nonsense blathering with my sister, the long chitchatting with my mother, the home-accent drivels with Lotta and Camilla, the giggling gossiping with Madelene and Pamela, the sipping of morning coffee with Micke, and the roar of laughter with Viklundskan. It is for *you* and all other loving friends that I now long most of all.

There is also another voice that comes to mind. A missing one – my father's. Even though I guess you would have questioned this whole crazy 'whatever-it-is-called-kind-of-thing' from the very beginning, I know that you are proud today. I miss you pappa, and I just wish you were here to live it.

And then there is this very caring tone. The one with which I fell in love on this very day eleven years ago, and today refer to as my husband's. During those thousands of insane days of ups and downs, you've been there all along – and Thomas, you know I couldn't have done this without you. And finally, of course, there are those whose chatter just never ever seems to stop. And luckily so. Now, when all other's have become silent, I can hear their tiny little voices vaguely, louder and noisier with every step running up the stairs, ending in a deafening happy cry when they push the door wide open: "Mommy, are you back?" I push the book aside for the last time, turn to my darling boys, smiling: "Yes, I'm back... for good".

It's a beautiful day. The first one beyond dissertation.

Stockholm, May 2nd 2012

Charlotta Bay

List of Papers

This thesis is based on the following papers:

- I Bay, Charlotta (2011) Framing Financial Responsibility: An Analysis of the Limitations of Accounting, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 22 (6): 593-607.
- II Bay, Charlotta (2012) Makeover Accounting: Investigating the Financial Edutainment of Everyday Life.
- III Bay, Charlotta (2012) Accounting for Inclusion: Constructing User Relevance to Private Investors.
- IV Bay, Charlotta, Bino Catasús & Gustav Johed (2012) Situating Financial Literacy, *Revised and re-submitted to Critical Perspectives on Accounting, special issue "Financialization – A new –ization?"*.

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Contents

THESIS INTRODUCTION

Making Accounting Matter	13
A Background Story	13
Introducing the Problem and the Aim.....	15
The Empirical Setting	20
Methodological Reflections.....	25
Paper Findings and Concluding Discussion	38
References	48

PAPER I

Framing Financial Responsibility	57
--	----

PAPER II

Makeover Accounting.....	75
--------------------------	----

PAPER III

Accounting for Inclusion	107
--------------------------------	-----

PAPER IV

Situating Financial Literacy	141
------------------------------------	-----

THESIS INTRODUCTION

Making Accounting Matter

A Background Story

Mission: Explain the Budget. This statement was found as an article headline¹, introducing the top news of the day in *Dagens Nyheter*, one of the major Swedish morning papers. The article revealed that the Ministry of Finance had engaged PR consultants to come up with suggestions on how to explain the government's financial policy to the general public. The consultants' task was to give advice on how to pedagogically package fiscal issues in terms of structure, content and illustrations so as to make them accessible not only to journalists, tax lawyers and accountants but most particularly to so-called less knowledgeable target groups. It was also disclosed that employees at the Ministry had attended communication courses arranged by consultancy firms, learning how to make the annual budget proposition more readable and financial arguments less complex. The news was framed as a scoop followed by an intense debate about the legitimacy of politicians using hundred of millions of crowns of taxpayers' money on communication advice.

There are many interesting aspects to this article. There is one implicit presumption, however, lurking about in the background of the article, to which I would like to draw your attention. Even though it is not explicitly spelled out, there seems to be a theory underlying the communication problems experienced by the Ministry of Finance. It implies that in order for financial information to turn heads and to come across as relevant, people first need to know how to make sense of its numbers, statistics, and vocabulary. However, this is a capability that seems not to be taken for granted. As not all people are believed to be capable of interpreting economic issues, concepts and numbers – at least not as they were intended to be interpreted – the way of designing them intelligibly into convincing arguments is consequently not always perceived by the Ministry as a straightforward activity.

¹ *Dagens Nyheter*, June 21, 2011; see also *Dagens Nyheter*, June 22, 2011.

The newspaper article serves as an illustrative take-off point for the thesis at hand, telling us a story not only about the complexity of representing financial accounts, but also that the way of doing so convincingly is assumed to depend on who is identified as their intended audience. On the one hand, the story confirms what has long been acknowledged within the accounting realm: that numbers, calculations and financial concepts are powerful since they are presumed to affect people's way of looking upon and acting in the world. On the other hand, it addresses one of accounting's perhaps less examined assumptions: that in order to matter and to make a difference to people, accounting information needs to be interpretable to its users. This thesis is an attempt to address this assumption more specifically.

The thrust of the thesis is not to discard the idea of accounting as a powerful producer of effects. Rather, the thesis examines those conditions that are believed to enable those effects to occur. In this way, it is hoped the thesis will open up a space, through a detailed study of four cases, where assumptions about accounting's constitutive power might be discussed and problematised.

There are arguably as many ways of introducing a thesis as there are theses. Some might have looked upon these first pages as a long elaborated abstract, summarising its major conclusions and contributions. Others have used them as an additional accounting of the research process. Alternatively, they have been understood as a space where the thesis finds its position in the research literature, or where the author is given an opportunity to address left-over issues not dealt with in the thesis papers – or as a combination of all of the above. *I* have chosen to devote my introductory pages to a kind of meta-reading, emanating from a reflective interpretation of the papers constituting this thesis. There are, of course, many ways of reading my papers. However, this introduction offers *one* such possible reading – mine. It might be looked upon as a telling of *my* story, providing the subsequent papers with common scenery and a coherent storyline running throughout the thesis. As such it is intended to serve as the author's 'reading instructions', giving a compressed account of the thesis' overarching plot: its dilemma, empirical setting, principal characters and final outcome.

The introduction is divided into four parts. The initial section gives a background account of how the issue of accounting's influential power has been addressed and looked upon in the accounting literature, providing a frame for the subsequent description of the story's dilemma of what it takes to endow accounting with such an influence, making it functioning as a constitutive means. In the following part, the reader is invited into the empirical world of the story. The thesis' four cases, constituting the story's illustrative examples, are all embedded in an everyday financialisation setting. They are

used to investigate the activities whereby different actors translate accounting into people's private sphere so as to make it matter and influence their personal financial management. These actors are to be looked upon as the story's main characters and are here referred to as accounting framers.

Before reaching the final outcome of the story, a personal declaration is presented regarding the guidelines that I have aspired to pursue with respect to the writing of this thesis. The declaration is hoped to contribute to the reader's understanding of how my view on conducting research has influenced this project's end product and, as such, shed light on its purpose and intentions. And finally, the last part reveals what came out of the thesis' investigations. Apart from summarising the results from each of the thesis' papers, it also provides the story with a condensed concluding discussion intended to point out the assumptions driving the idea of accounting as a constitutive means, and the conditions under which it is made to operate as such.

Introducing the Problem and the Aim

The Constitutive Turn of Accounting

As accounting becomes more influential in everyday affairs, it is important for us to have a greater insight into the processes through which that influence is created and sustained (Hopwood 1994, p. 301).

Three decades have passed since Hopwood and colleagues in a series of articles introduced the idea of accounting as a constitutive means of social settings (e.g. Burchell et al. 1980, 1985; Hopwood 1983; 1987). Hopwood stated that accounting, in all of its manifestations, plays a significant part in organisational transformations and that "the importance of accounting's constitutive roles should not be under-emphasized" (1987, p. 229). To say that accounting is a means used to intervene, influencing ways of thinking and ways of doing, is not today a very extraordinary statement. Now, the constitutive turn of accounting (Asdal 2011) is well established in its social research field. Nevertheless, in its early years, it broke radically from the view that understands accounting as an impartial measurement activity concerned with providing useful information to interested parties in decision-making situations. Advocates of this latter perspective, elsewhere referred to as, for example, the correspondence view (Solomons 1978, 1991), state that "representational faithfulness and neutrality are characteristics of accounting numbers" (Solomons 1991, p. 288), stressing facticity, precision and objectivity as accounting's dominating trademarks.

However, pioneers of the constitutive view (e.g. Hines 1988), questioned this positivistic notion of accounting as a precise and apolitical representation of reality. They opposed to the idea of accounting numbers as “mirrors of economy” (Napier 2006, p. 456), presenting a pre-existing and independent economic world as it ‘is’. In their view, by contrast, accounting is not just reflective of reality, but constitutive, contributing to the shaping of the environment it simultaneously portrays. As such, accounting might be said to serve rhetorical purposes (Arrington and Francis 1993; Thompson 1994; Young 2003; Aho 2005), not merely used to inform but also to influence, persuade and manipulate people to look upon the world in certain ways (Caruthers and Espeland 1991). From the constitutive point of view, accounting is not only a technical practice used to report on economic activities, but also a social and political one, employed to intervene and transform human economic behaviour as well as public (Neu 2006) and organisational life (Hopwood 1987).

As noted earlier, several branches of the accounting field have long embraced the constitutive notion of accounting as a forceful producer of effects. One such branch, where a rather direct relationship between accounting and people’s behaviour is recognised, is that of management control. The nowadays rather famous adage ‘what gets measured gets managed’ (Behn 2003) is based on the idea that measurement activities affect human behaviour, which – if true – “promises a perfectly controllable organization” (Catasús et al. 2007, p. 506). The faith that measurement and calculations can contribute to steer the organisation towards certain goals – however criticised (e.g. Nørreklit 2000) – has been an especially important argument for justifying and encouraging organisations to engage in strategic activities (Ward 1992; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1993). That involves, for example, the deployment of balanced scorecards (Kaplan and Norton 1992, 1996), which has extended the constitutive scope of accounting to also include non-financial accounts. Accounting in terms of measurements is, as such, believed to impact its environment.

Another area is concerned with how accounting technologies contributes to the ways individual accountability is constructed within organisations (e.g. Roberts, and Scapens 1985; Munro and Mouritsen 1996) and public institutions (e.g. Llewellyn 1998; Kurunmäki 2004). Processes of responsabilisation have been largely elaborated within this field; however, regardless of the multiplicity of studies, accounting seems to be acknowledged almost unanimously as key to the production of rational and responsible people (e.g. Roberts et al. 1985; Miller and O’Leary 1990; Sinclair 1995; Ahrens 1996). This relationship between accounting and responsibility follows from the premise that by providing forms of visibility, modes of classification, and techniques of calculation, accounting offers opportunities for the individual

to compare and contrast oneself and one's performance against an agreed-upon norm (Miller 1994a; Boland and Schultze 1996). Thus, accounting serves as an important vehicle whereby people are given direction as to how to improve themselves. This implies that by exposing people to and engaging them in calculative activities, accounting contributes to making people responsible.

A third strand of accounting research where the constitutive view has been widely influential is the one dominated by sociologically power-oriented researchers. They developed Hopwood's original ideas further, inspired by the Foucauldian concept of governmentality (Foucault 1978). The governmentality researchers are concerned with the "construction of the governable person" (Miller and O'Leary 1987): studying broadly stated political programmes of disciplining people and controlling organisations, and how these programmes are enabled and introduced at the local level by various kinds of technologies (e.g. Miller 1990; Rose and Miller 1992; Hopwood et al. 1994; Power 1999). Accounting, in this technological sense, is considered a powerful constitutive device, believed to make these programmes work. There is, of course, a fourth research field where the constitutive role of accounting has been addressed, as well as a fifth, and a sixth, etc. The areas above constitute only a few examples and might be extended by a plethora of others: corporate social accountability, environmental accounting, intangible capital reporting, etc. – all providing their own illustrations of how accounting is enmeshed in processes of bringing about certain effects.

There is something almost seductive about the idea of accounting as a powerful and constitutive means, making people think and act in particular ways. It might allure us to assume that whenever accounting is put in place a specific effect is anticipated to follow. Or as differently put by Llewellyn and Milne (2007): "like a recipe, rule, guideline, template, protocol or law, accounting tells people how to do things" (p. 806). These are strong claims and, in my view, call for problematisation. Because, to extend the recipe analogy, to follow the instructions of a Swedish baking recipe presupposes an understanding of the precise meaning of a *decilitre* or degrees *Celsius*, which otherwise for most Americans would result in a disastrous cake. Similarly, to acknowledge and act upon accounting information as useful decision-making input requires a person endowed with an ability to extract the meaning of its figures and terminology. This is arguably not given by Nature and is only made to occur if users are taught how to read, decode, and interpret financial accounts accordingly. So even though financially reported figures mediate meaning in communication processes (Hall 1997), it presupposes that the communicator and the audience each possess something that functions as a codebook, and that these two codebooks are, at the very least, similar if not identical.

However, far from all situations meet this demand. When going beyond the borders of professional and organisational fields, entering into the world of people's everyday financial life, there are indications of discrepancies between the way that produced financial information is expected to be understood and the way in which that information is interpreted by its recipients. In a recent series of reports, commissioned by the Swedish Financial Supervisory Authority (hereafter FSA), it is concluded that "many adults struggle with basic calculations and lack an understanding of elementary financial concepts" (Almenberg and Widmark 2011a, p. 2). These findings are said to raise questions about the capability of Swedish households to make sense of financial information related to their own private finances, resulting in poor, and at times, devastating financial decisions. This, in turn, is claimed to create a dilemma of communication:

Our results highlight the importance of acknowledging that quantitative information can be perceived differently by different consumers. When information is communicated in a way that requires good numeracy, it is practically speaking not very informative if the consumer is not adequately equipped to absorb that information (Almenberg and Widmark 2011b, p. 28).²

This discrepancy dilemma has previously been touched upon by Ezzamel et al. (2004), who claim that the effects of accounts are dependent on how they are interpreted by their users, and, to draw on Munro (1993), such an interpretation is not determined by the accounting inscription per se. This implies that due to their lack of intrinsic meaning, accounting inscriptions can mean different things to different audiences (Qu and Cooper 2011; see also Quattrone 2009), which consequently might undermine their constitutive power to make things happen.

Nevertheless, this is not to be understood as though accounting inscriptions and technologies are powerless or mute. Catasús (2010) acknowledges that indicators do indeed 'speak', however not solely by themselves, subscribing to the view that accounting is not automatically imbued with any general and essential significance to make people act, common to any kind of situation. Rather, such significance needs to be constructed, or as Chua (1995) would have put it, fabricated. Similarly, Oakes, Townley and Cooper (1998) argue that even though accounting is recognised as an effective means in bringing about change, this effect should not be taken for granted, concluding that "the process through which this occurs is more complex than much of the current literature suggests" (ibid, p. 258). Together, these objections indicate limitations to the constitutive power of accounting, which in turn might have

² The quote is borrowed from Paper III in this thesis.

implications for the possibilities of its various manifestations exerting influence on its environment.

The Dilemma of Making Accounting Matter

Although it nevertheless adheres to the constitutive perspective on accounting, this thesis follows these problematising tracks. It does so by addressing the role of accounting interpretations and how some actors assume that they must be taken into consideration in the process of making accounting constitutive. On the one hand, there is one kind of actors, such as the standard setting organisations FASB and IASB, who seem to work from the premise that accounting is exclusively intended to be read by “a rational economic decision-maker” (Young 2006, p. 596), often referred to as a *homo economicus*. To such a user, the interpretation of financial information is held to be uncontroversial with no explanatory measures needed. This is arguably a rather unfortunate and problematic conclusion, not least since it rules out all those potential others who are considered *not* to belong to this category of ‘rational economic decision-makers’, but who still are exposed to financial information.

This, on the other hand, indicates that there might indeed exist people to whom the meaning of financial accounts is not particularly clear. This idea is further supported by other actors, such as the FSA and its corresponding international organisations, who are said to have reasons to presume that a substantial part of the Western population suffers from difficulties in making sense of numbers and financial concepts. Given those situations, a dilemma arises regarding how to influence people’s way of thinking and acting by means of accounting information. Their line of argument is that unless it is interpretable to its users, the likelihood of accounting functioning as a constitutive means is curtailed. How to address this dilemma of making accounting matter is the inquiry of this thesis.

The aim of the thesis is to examine how accounting is made to matter. To this aim, the thesis investigates the activities of those actors whose task it is to render accounting interpretable. This involves, more specifically, a detailed analysis of the practices whereby people’s interpretation of financial accounts is addressed and worked on in order to make people receptive and responsive to accounting. The analysis is directed towards investigating two interrelated questions:

1. What constitutive practices are believed to make accounting matter and what specifically do they aim to achieve?
2. What assumptions about accounting do those practices imply?

Thus, the thesis is not only involved with delineating the assumptions and practices making up those constitutive activities, but also and perhaps more importantly, problematising some of the conditions under which accounting is said to be enabled to function as a constitutive means, affecting people towards particular ends. In this way, the thesis is hoped to contribute to the discussion about “the basis of accounting’s persuasive power” (Chua 1995, p. 115) and to refine the understanding of how accounting is made constitutive.

Apart from its attempt to theoretically contribute to the accounting literature, the thesis might also be considered as widening the empirical scope of accounting investigation. Unlike the bulk of accounting research, the thesis moves the empirical focus away from investigating the accounting activities directed towards individuals at the professional/organisational level. By contrast, it targets the private sphere of people’s everyday financial life, studying those practices that address individuals as actors in relation to their own finances – a point of investigation that has been disregarded or marginally examined (for exceptions, see e.g. Llewellyn and Walker 2000; Walker and Llewellyn 2000; Carnegie and Walker 2007a,b). By addressing issues of ‘low finance’ (Vargha 2011), the thesis also might be considered to add to the growing research field of financialisation. Further elaborating on the thesis’ empirical relations is the issue of the next section.

The Empirical Setting

Financial Management in the Private Sphere

In spite of a growing understanding of accounting as something that has come to permeate everyday life (Hopwood 1994), previous research has, as Napier puts it (2006), “a tendency to view the actions and practices of élites as inherently more important than the life of ‘ordinary people’” (p. 459). By consequence, most research concerning the impact of accounting has been conducted at the organisational level, studying how accounting representations, technologies, and vocabulary influence and change people’s professional working conditions (Jeacle 2009). However, since accounting is claimed to mutate and migrate, change form and location (Miller 1998; Napier 2006), it also allows economic knowledge to intervene into spheres from which it has previously been excluded (Power 1992).

This proposes that accounting might not only be perceived as a purely professional phenomenon that inhibits accounting scholars from looking, as Miller (1994b) puts it, “beyond organisations as the exclusive level of research” (p. 1). Instead, it is encouraged to complement previous literature by

studies of accounting's role in constituting society as 'economic' (Napier 2006) by moving the focus of scrutiny beyond, for example, the professional firm or manufacturing facility (Jeacle 2009). Hence, what is called for are further explorations of the interpenetration between accounting and society (Miller 2007; Mennicken, Miller, and Samiolo 2008) in the everyday life of 'ordinary' people. This thesis is a response to these calls.

Consequently, the thesis pursues the idea that accounting is a situated everyday practice, operating at *all* levels of society and that its analysis should not be restricted to the traditional arena of the professional organisation. It does so by studying how financial information is presented and conceptualised to address people in their role as *private* individuals in situations related to their own domestic financial management. More precisely, the thesis investigates the activities whereby people are believed to become financially refined in order to improve their ability to care for their own financial affairs. Apart from forming part of the private financial sphere of people's lives, the empirical cases in the thesis were more specifically chosen because they exemplify the difficulties that certain groups of people are presumed to suffer from in making sense of financial and accounting information. Even though questionable (sic!), such people are possibly more easily identified when we cross the borders of the professional organisation.

The empirical cases were also selected for their topicality. In times like these when headlines³ declaring the confidence in the financial sector as being at an all-time low, people are still being asked to put full trust in investing their money in the financial market. This might seem odd, taking the recent American and European financial crises into account, and needs to be understood from a wider societal development. According to French and Kneale (2009), the last two decades have witnessed, as part of a more extensive financialisation of society, a privatisation of the provision of social welfare. National reforms and changes in pension arrangements (see e.g. Ohlsson 2007; Belfrage 2008; OECD 2008), as well as private welfare security increasingly conditioned by financial services, are said to have resulted in a "massification" of household savings" (Erturk et al. 2008, p. 26), along with a "dramatic growth in financial intermediaries" (ibid), giving feedback on the calculations made by private investors. This on-going process is referred to as "the financialisation of daily life" (Martin 2002; see also Erturk et al. 2007; Langley 2007; 2008) and is claimed to require "new identities and forms of calculation from its citizens [who] must now take individual responsibility for their financial futures" (Froud et al. 2007, p. 340).

³ *Expressen* (Swedish tabloid), October 9, 2011.

Not all citizens, however, are proven to be sufficiently equipped to live up to those new financial expectations. Hence, in order to remedy these deficiencies, measures are taken worldwide in terms of international as well as country-specific programmes of financial education (OECD 2005, 2009). In a plan of action produced by the Swedish FSA (Finansinspektionen 2007), it is revealed that financial education activities are presumed to be as most critical at those stages of life when the individual's economic conditions are changing. The FSA exemplifies these major shifts, which, for the purpose of this thesis, are divided into three phases on a lifetime axis:

- The *pre-adult phase* encompasses those years when the individual is presumed to stand on the cusp of independent adult life, starting up a household of one's own.
- The *midterm phase* incorporates the period when many people are believed to settle down, start up a family, and find themselves in need to make important investment decisions, such as buying a house or a car, for example, or provide for the children's future welfare.
- The *retirement phase* refers to the latter part of life when financial provisions are expected to have been made in order to secure one's pension.

These three phases are used to represent the thesis' areas of investigation. This means that each of the four papers addresses a financial dilemma belonging to one of the three lifetime phases. This is described further below in the section *Paper Findings and Concluding Discussion*.

In the thesis' papers, we are about to make acquaintance with a selection of actors whose activities are directed towards people whose private financial situation is considered as particularly vulnerable. According to the respondents' testimonies, this vulnerability should not primarily be understood as a resulting from people being disabled, incapacitated or mentally unfit to manage their personal finances. Rather, these people are considered as having not yet adjusted to the contemporary demands of managing one's personal affairs, and therefore impaired, by their inexperience or lack of awareness, in living up to these new expectations of a modern financially responsible citizen. This is claimed to have entailed far-reaching consequences. According to the OECD (2005), for example, there are a substantial number of Western people who are regarded as suffering from an untrained and therefore limited ability to interpret and respond to financial information, and who are unaware or unfamiliar with how to perform basic calculations as well as to engage in investment and budgeting activities. Hence, given such situations, it is proposed that financial information and financial management should be

taught and explained to them by someone. This ‘someone’ constitutes the thesis’ central character and is introduced in the following section.

Accounting Framers

In each of the subsequent papers, we are invited to follow a number of activities performed by various groups of *accounting framers*. An accounting framer refers to an actor who constructs accounting in such a manner so as to generate certain effects. More specifically, this involves activities intended to steer the way accounts are interpreted by others in order to spur and enable a specific behaviour to follow. The concept of framer borrows from Goffman’s analytical notion of frame, denoting a defining means or a “schemata of interpretation” (Goffman 1974, p. 21) that regulates and governs the way individuals establish meaning and motivate action. The activities performed by accounting framers follow from this definition and can be divided into two respective sets: identification and design practices.

The *identification practices* are directed towards detecting and distinguishing different kinds of accounting recipients by categorising them according to similar sets of characteristics or issues at stake. The identification is motivated by the assumption that accounting recipients are heterogeneous, and therefore cannot all be addressed similarly. Moreover, the variety of recipients is also assumed to entail a diversity of ways of making sense of accounting information, including the one of not making *any* sense. Since the objective of the framers is to establish *a* specific kind of accounting interpretation, the *design practices* involve adjusting the construction of accounting information accordingly, so as to replace earlier interpretations, or the lack thereof, with the desired one. Such an adjustment is thought of being accomplished with respect to the recipient’s characteristics. Hence, a (re-)designed presentation of accounts based on detailed knowledge of recipients is assumed to be key to the accounting framer’s process of constructing accounting information so as to matter.

So then, what kind of accounting framers are to be found at the everyday sites where people are expected to be refined into financially responsible citizens? The occurrence of ‘experts’ is nowadays a widespread element in Western society. Furusten (2007) refers to this as the expertification of society, based on the notion that specialist knowledge has become critical as a consequence of increasing societal complexity. There is a common perception of the expert taking the form of a professional – such as a physician or a lawyer – whose expertise rests on highly abstract, scientifically based knowledge that requires related technical skills to be interpreted and codified (Larson 1990; Abbot 1998). There are professionals who might be considered accounting framers, such as standard setters, accountants, and auditors, who regulate and instruct the behaviour of organisational members. How-

ever, in this thesis, the professional is of minor interest. When we move the focus away from the financial conditions of organisational life to instead examine the measures taken to remedy the difficulties that people are said to encounter in their *personal* financial lives, another kind of accounting framer surfaces.

The accounting framer at issue here might be looked upon as a kind of *bricoleur*. The term is borrowed from the French verb “bricoler” which means to “to fix something ingeniously”⁴, achieved by making creative use of whatever materials are at hand. As opposed to the professional who is defined by his/her exclusive knowledge, the expertise of the bricoleur is rather to skilfully combine and fit together heterogeneous kinds of knowledge and techniques into, what Rose (1998) calls, a “complex know-how” (p. 86), assembled to best suit the situation, recipient or purpose in question. This kind of accounting framers tend to be found in sectors such as information services, the media, consultancy firms, public authorities, and financial/business services, whose task it is to actively shape and/or change people’s habits and views on private financial issues. By virtue of their sophisticated know-how, serving as a kind of translation mechanism (Miller and Rose 1990), the accounting framers are enabled to identify and address different kinds of accounting recipients, and translate their daily financial worries into individually suitable vocabularies that render the problems not only interpretable but also manageable.

In this thesis’ papers, we are about to meet various sorts of accounting framers, but all of them are characterised by the bricoleur kind of expertise. The papers examine how this expertise is employed to translate accounting into people’s everyday financial lives so as to make it matter. In the first paper, we encounter a group of *public civil servants* whose activities are intended to influence the attitude towards private financial management among Swedish high school students. In the second one, we are introduced to a televised *financial makeover programme* and its exercises to transform severely indebted people, led by two financial advisors. In the third paper, we are informed of how *telemarketing consultants* at a Swedish pension insurance company are instructed to render financial arguments to different kinds of pension savers in telephone conversations. And finally, in the fourth paper, we return to the public civil servants encountered in the first paper, and make a comparison of their efforts to understand and translate the concept of ‘financial literacy’ with those of professional framers constituting of *audit*

⁴ Oxford English Dictionary, Third edition, March 2005. Online version March 2012: <http://www04.sub.su.se:2409/view/Entry/261904>. Accessed April 9, 2012. See also <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bricolage>. Accessed April 9, 2012.

committee members. Apart from addressing issues of people's private financial affairs, the choice of accounting framers is also motivated by the dilemma that the framers are said to experience when communicating financial information to people presumed to be less financially aware or experienced. A more thorough description of the respective papers is presented further below in the sections *Methodological Reflections* and *Paper Findings and Concluding Discussion*.

Finally – a point of clarification. As this study does not examine the accounting *recipients* directly, it is beyond its scope to determine whether or not the framers' constructs of accounting actually worked as expected, or how the intended audiences were affected by the activities performed by the various account framing actors. As such, the thesis is *not* engaged in investigating any recipient effects. This entails that the thesis is strictly concerned with the accounting framers' presumptions of how they believe accounting need to be rendered in order to be, in their view, successfully interpreted by its users. As such, this thesis takes a sense-giving perspective, as elaborated by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), isolating one party's efforts to influence the way another party interprets and makes sense of accounting information.

Methodological Reflections

My intention with the following section is to convey my personal views on and approach to research activity. I have chosen to do so in terms of a number of methodological exhortations that might be said to summarise what has motivated and encouraged me in pursuing the writing of this thesis. The exhortations are to be looked upon as a kind of 'accounting of myself' where I make an attempt to declare my stance towards both the purpose of my research and the efforts of accomplishing this purpose. The exhortations express my idea of research and the roles of its problem, theory, and empirical material, as well as the implications that their interrelations entail for my choices of methods and interpretation of findings. They are also connected to a few personal illustrations taken from my own struggling experience of pursuing the work of this research project. It is my hope that this personal declaration might potentially enlighten and inform the reader's understanding of how this thesis ended up in the way it did.

The Role of the Purpose

Approaching the end of writing up this thesis, I found myself struggling with the most fundamental issue of them all: *what is this dissertation actually about?* Trying hard informing the reader about the thesis' originality, I asked myself: what motivated me to spend hours, days and years writing all these pages, hundreds of them, about this what ever it was that I have been writing about? An article debate over theory building (DiMaggio 1995; Sutton and

Staw 1995; Weick 1995) used as inspirational reading for a methods seminar shed light on my dilemma. The topic of discussion revolved around the alleged scarcity of contemporary research that actually aimed at improving theory development, or as Weick (1995) calls it, ‘theorizing’ (see also Llewellyn 2003; Chua and Mahama 2011). Without entirely discarding the dominating additive and generalisable approach of most research, the authors wished to encourage and make room for bold, de-familiarising studies courageous enough not only to add to already existing theories but also to criticise them and their underlying assumptions.

To a doctoral student, it might perhaps come off as a bit too pretentious a task, but nevertheless compelling. At least in theory. Because who does not want to be a bold and courageous researcher? Throughout the thesis, I had made use of accounting literature as a tool for understanding my empirical material. Reading these articles made me wonder whether the results of my investigations might be used to problematise the accounting literature in turn. Enthused by the insights, I began to re-read my papers with a pair of meta-theoretical spectacles (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000), intended to make a reflective and critical interpretation of my own interpretations, in the hope that they would provide alternative points of departure for thinking about the papers’ results. It turned out, however, to be a quite problematic and far from straightforward endeavour, often ending in distress: how on earth should I make my thesis findings come across as a challenge to prior accounting theory? Maybe, it was to take on more than I could manage. Or as Sutton and Staw (1995) put it: “Are we expecting too much?” (p. 380). Nevertheless, I decided, even though in all its modesty, to give it a go.

Make a Break – At Least at Some Point!

According to Miller and O’Leary (1987), a conviction of critical sociology of accounting is that its task is not to be the reification of well-reputed accounting knowledge, making it appear universal, natural, or reasonable. It is instead to destabilise it, so as to enable new theoretical constructs. To acknowledge the often rather complex and confusing relationships between social contexts and the functioning of accounting, and to put the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions found in those settings under close empirical scrutiny so as to generate deep and new theoretical understandings, is what Ahrens and Dent (1998) refer to as research characterised by ‘richness’. Such an approach to studying accounting suggests putting what we already know about its uses or roles to the test, and to problematise established notions and theories of the accounting phenomenon.

However, being critical in the sense I understand it, does not necessarily mean to take on an emancipatory mission, claiming to have a better, superior or more truthful version of how things work. It is not about completely dis-

missing or rejecting the idea under scrutiny, saying that it is altogether misleading, wrong or erroneous. The ambition of this thesis, and as stated earlier, is therefore not to belittle the idea of accounting as constitutive of its environment. Rather, and to quote Chua (1995), “its task is more modest” (p. 114): the thesis intention is to make an attempt to problematise the conditions under which that accounting influence is assumed to happen. Such an attempt aspires to present or illustrate another way of approaching the idea of the constitutive role of accounting, enabling it to be examined by means of alternative interpretations or different kinds of seeing. Hence, the purpose is not to discard but to disturb previous thinking, at least at some point, making the established, familiar, well-known to come across as a bit troubling. Because it is in this taking of a new angle, in the understanding of accounting differently, that I potentially might have something else to say about accounting.

But how is this to be achieved? What does that imply in respect to the research process? In the remaining parts of this section, I will elaborate on the implications that the idea of my research purpose has for the roles of the problem, the theory, and the empirical material.

The Role of the Problem

Not so long ago, a colleague of mine shared an experience he had. When asked for a piece of advice from a manager in substantial financial distress, he had replied: “I am an Academic. As such I don’t always have a precise answer to give to you, but I’m pretty good at tracking down your key problem”. I found it rather catchy, quite to the point, and it got me thinking. Maybe that is what we are good at: detecting problems. It reminded me of Foucault (2002) who once said that the powerful is not the one who possesses the answers, but the one posing the questions, and that there are moments in life when these questions need to be asked if one ever is to think or see differently. When translating that insight into the writing of a thesis, I concluded that its point is not merely about the answers that I deliver in my papers but most importantly about the actual fundamental question or dilemma that springs out of and fuels them. Maybe it is in a problematic question that my research can grow bold, and not only in its answers. So then, what is a bold research question, and perhaps more importantly, how is it generated?

Look for Trouble!

A common way of getting a research project started is to dive into prior literature, making oneself a map of what has already been done in the area in order to identify and carve out a niche not yet addressed. According to Sandberg and Alvesson (2011), this kind of gap-spotting activity expresses faith in existing studies and the ideas on which they are based, and strives to

build positively on them. Such an approach most commonly aims at a contribution that adds to, extends, develops, or broadens prior existing theory. Gap-spotting is, as the authors point out, “more likely to reinforce or moderately revise, rather than challenge, already influential theories” (ibid, p. 25). Problematisation, as another way of posing questions, looks for trouble, is more sceptical and takes issue with previous theory. Problematisation is directed towards matters that may be “fundamentally ‘wrong’” (ibid, p. 40) or contradictory with the elementary ideas, concepts or notions of prior studies, trying to challenge them by addressing them with the construction of bold research questions. The authors conclude:

Hence, while gap-spotting means identifying various gaps in existing literature (e.g. confusion, neglect, and application spotting), it does not actively challenge the assumptions underlying existing theory. Problematization, on the other hand, is about challenging assumptions which underlie existing theory in some significant way. When some important assumptions are problematized, this becomes an opportunity for critical insights and new ideas of a more radical character (p. 33).

I believe most research, including my own, shares some semblances of both gap-spotting and problematisation, and that both ways should be warranted by the argument and contribution they make, separately or in combination. Regardless of the subject, the construction and continuous refining of an intriguing question or dilemma about what is troubling a researcher is, in my view, the most crucial starting – and ending – point for any kind of research. Because behind every answer, solution, or theory, there is always a problem that has been grappled with, and the researcher’s challenge is to get hold of that problem, making it visible to the reader, moulding it into a disturbing question that makes it come across as of concern and relevance. Otherwise, as Sandberg and Alvesson (2011) warn, “if we do not pose innovative research questions, it is less likely that our research efforts will generate interesting and significant theories” (p. 24).

In search of an overarching trouble theme for my thesis, I started re-reading my own papers. From that reading, there was one mutual finding that stood out: in the attempts to make people financially responsible, accounting seemed not always to be brought into play, and when it was, it appeared not necessarily in the ordinary shape we are used to. I found that peculiar. The accounting literature had taught me that accounting, due to its ability to make people think and act in rational and responsible ways, is considered as *key* to processes of financial responsabilisation. So why was accounting not as apparent here, or showing up in other guises, if at all? What did that *mean*? And what did it tell me about accounting? To me, that was troubling, and informed by the empirical material, it signalled that in order to make accounting influence people, it is assumed that something needs to be done

to it. As such my problem came to be concerned with the assumptions underlying the idea of accounting as a constitutive means, and more specifically, addressed the conditions under which it is made to operate as such. By means of problematising this condition, I found a way that might be considered as contributing to theorising accounting, and perhaps make *one* rich point.

This search for trouble eventually ended up in the formulation of the thesis' aim, i.e. to examine how accounting is made to matter. The research problems of each of the four papers relate to this problematisation, albeit from different angles, and are summarised in the table *Summary of Thesis Problems, Methods and Theoretical Frames*, presented further below.

The Role of Theory

The findings of this thesis rest on a qualitative analysis of an empirical collection of four cases. Qualitative field studies have often been associated with a quest for meaning (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992), and in relation to my thesis this has involved an investigation of the specific meanings of accounting drawn upon by different actors (accounting framers) in these fields. However, meaning is difficult, because, to me, it is not something that one straightforwardly can ask about and expect to be instantly revealed by the answers or observations provided by the respondents. Thus the meaning of accounting is not directly observable, and cannot, following a constructionist and anti-essentialist approach (Hines 1988; Chua 1995), be found in the accounting phenomenon itself. Therefore, the challenge of the qualitative researcher is to explain and relate those empirical observations to a certain theoretical understanding (Ahrens and Chapman 2006), providing the researcher with a tool of interpretation. Steedman (1991) concludes:

Nothing means anything on its own. Meaning comes not from seeing or even observation alone, for there is no 'alone' of this sort. Neither is meaning lying around in nature to be scooped up by the senses; rather it is constructed. 'Constructed' in this context, means produced by acts of interpretation (p. 54).

This means that to qualitatively oriented researchers, the data taken from the field can only be made sense of if it is defined with reference to theories that can illuminate its meaning. The meaning of 'reality' is thus something that ultimately needs to be constructed by means of an interpretation, which might however take many forms, depending on the theoretical perspective taken. The interpretation frames used to endow my empirical cases with a theoretical context rest on a social constructionist basis (Potter 1996; Hall 1997; Hacking 2000; Burr 2003) and are further elaborated in each of the

papers. A summarised account is presented below in the table *Summary of Thesis Problems, Methods and Theoretical Frames*.

To continue, certain theories tend to grow more dominant than others. In the accounting literature, this might be said to apply to the idea of the constitutive role of accounting. According to this idea, and as previously accounted for in the introduction to this thesis, accounting is not only perceived as a technical practice used to report on economic activities. It is also acknowledged as a powerful producer of effects and is ascribed the potential of intervening and transforming social life, turning people into economically rational beings. This idea is widely accepted, drawn on in a multifaceted range of research papers, and might nowadays even be claimed as belonging to the very basics in the social studies of accounting. When growing this influential, it nevertheless runs the risk of becoming something unquestionably self-evident. In such cases, the idea not only provides *one* possible kind of interpretation of ‘reality’, but becomes *the* interpretation of ‘reality’, or even ‘reality’ itself.

In the following, I account for a personal experience of mine about the unfortunate consequences that a dominant theory may entail for how a researcher approaches an understanding of her empirical material. Consequences, however, that eventually also opened up for other venues.

Embrace Surprise!

My first thesis project, resulting in the paper *Framing Financial Responsibility*, involved observing the classroom activities of a national high-school tour performed by a group of civil servants, introducing issues of financial management to high school students. Having the constitutive notion of accounting in mind, I embarked on the tour, expecting to encounter an abundance of budget tools, calculative exercises, and financial investment tips. Even though such things were not entirely absent, there was, to my disappointment, surprisingly little of this to be found. Initially, I tried to ignore it, thinking that I had not looked close enough or that I had spent a minimum of time in the classrooms. So I made my homework, returned to the high-school sites for yet another turn, but no: there were only occasional elements of numerical accounts, financial information and accounting technologies – at least in the accounting outfit I was expecting. At first, I found it unfortunate, then odd, and finally intriguing: maybe it was not my research inexperience or the limited scope of empirical observations that caused this obvious void of findings, but theory. When entering the empirical scene, having in mind the well-founded idea of accounting as vital to financial responsabilisation processes raised expectations of what I was going to see. As such, theory directed my sight and at once restricted my way of seeing. It took a while

though before I learned to embrace this unexpected surprise and turn it into a point in itself.

This constitutes one example of how a dominant theory, at least initially, might raise expectations of what to be found and hence limit the researcher's way of approaching and interpreting empirical materials differently. When trying to fit observations into pre-structured understandings, established theories are used as means of confirmation, rather than as tools for critical examination. Used as such, the researcher risks ending up in a circular reasoning, inhibiting other understandings from occurring. Because, as put by Chua and Mahama (2011), "[t]oo often, action that does not fit a general pattern is quickly skipped over but might provide insight" (p. 81). Similarly, Ahrens and Dent (1998) warn that "overly strong a priori conceptualization could filter contextual information to such an extent that it would deny the emergence of relevant theoretical interpretations" (p. 24). Hence, by putting one's trust in one kind of 'reality' interpretation, the capacity for reflection and critical interrogation is, if not entirely eliminated, at least reduced.

Nevertheless, in my case, holding on to the dominant theory also enabled a surprise to eventually come about, because without the failed expectations stemming from theory, I would not have been given the opportunity to ask myself 'why do we find no accounting here?' By affirming the anomalies and irregularities between theory and empirical observations I found something else that turned my investigation into a "surprise machine" (Gouldner 1970, in DiMaggio 1995, p. 391). Without disagreeing with the suggestion that point-rich research should aim to spur an 'aha' response from the reader (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000), I would argue that the 'aha' exclamation should preferably be part of the researcher's response as well.

Find Another Angle!

There is a common view of the research process that after finishing collecting the empirical material, the researcher returns to his/her desk, picks a suitable theory and starts the analysis. This view of the research process "moving systematically from field material, through interpretation, to explanation" (Ahrens and Dent 1998, p. 9) implies a rather rational and mechanistic approach to research activity. However, this view is contested by a range of qualitatively oriented researchers (e.g. Baxter and Chua 1998; Ahrens and Chapman 2006; Vaivio 2008), arguing that research instead is characterised by a highly iterative and recursive procedure, where problem, theory and data continuously influence each other throughout the research process, resulting in modifications aimed at eventually generating an acceptable fit.

In my own experience, and as exemplified by the account given above, the role of theory in this process is double-edged. We need theory, because

without it, ‘reality’ is in effect meaningless. There is however no theory-less ‘reality’ since we always arrive at it with a baggage of assumptions. As illustrated in the example above, these might restrict our seeing and inhibit us from seeing differently. Hence, the challenge is to break away from these assumptions, at least at some point, in order to enable something else to emerge.

One such example flows from one of my many struggles with writing up the *Makeover Accounting* paper. The empirical case, consisting of the financial TV show *The Luxury Trap*, was tricky. Being highly rich in details, intriguing, topical, and provocative, it provided an exemplary illustration of how contemporary neo-liberal governance is played out by means of plaiting together financial education and televised entertainment. Hence, going for a power-oriented theoretical interpretation seemed highly evident. However, it still left me with the impression: don’t we already know this? Would it not be yet another example, however interesting, of all those governmentality-inspired studies? The ‘so-what?’ question disturbed me. After watching hours of programmes, looking for signs of surprising elements and alternative angles, I began to suspect that there actually were none to be found. But there always are. Quite by chance, it was when I found myself a pair of new spectacles, provided by reading an article by Vollmer (2007), that something else surfaced when watching the same set of programmes yet another time. Coupled with the *Luxury Trap* data, this pair of theoretical spectacles helped to de-familiarise the story for me, making me *see* what was not there in the first place.

Here, theory played a double role in terms of *seeing*: as much as one theory can grow dominant and fix reality as one kind of seeing, another one might also enable reality to come alive, to break loose from the dominant one, providing a new angle. Ahrens and Dent (1998) urge us to mind this duplicity, and – in spite of the pitfall that “too many ‘goggles’ may be no better than walking blind” (Vaivio 1998, p. 77) – try to develop multiple theoretical lenses. Hence, the practice of doing qualitative research involves an ongoing reflection on data and its positioning against different theories so as to generate surprising insights (Ahrens and Chapman 2006). The way of doing so is not always straightforward and entails consequences for how to relate and make use of both theory and the empirical material. My view of the role of the latter is the topic of the next section.

The Role of the Empirical Material

Do Small, Dig Deep, Think Rich!

Accounting researchers may have different motives for engaging in field studies, and, depending on the focus of studies, different research designs are

privileged. As pointed out by Ahrens and Dent (1998), some studies bring technical aspects of accounting to the fore, leaving the contextual dimension in the background, and vice versa. Even though they acknowledge research that adheres to a combination of the two, the authors argue that studies, like this thesis, that aim at deepening our understanding of the sometimes contradictory and ambiguous ways accounting is drawn upon by different actors, or of how accounting can constitute organisational life (and beyond), “the emphasis is less on technique and more of the roles and interpretations of accounting in use” (ibid, p. 2). Following from such a focus where organisational and social aspects are foregrounded, the authors suggest that the empirical material needs to be characterised by ‘richness’ or “rich slices of organizational life” (ibid, p. 1). ‘Rich’, in this sense, should not necessarily be equated with ‘grand volumes’ in terms of the quantity of empirical cases. Rather, as put by Dyer and Wilkins (1991):

... the key issue is not...the number of cases... The central issue is whether the researcher is able to understand and describe the context of the social dynamics of the scene in question to such a degree as to make the context intelligible to the reader and to generate theory in relationship to that context (p. 617).

Compared to research resting on a large quantity of cases and where descriptions, by default, need to be held “rather thin”, focusing on “surface data” (ibid, p. 616), qualitative field work is about establishing a close engagement with (Ahrens and Dent 1998), rather than objective distance from, the social realities lived by others. Richness in material is in this respect thought of as “making understandable the actions and motivations of often very skilfully people who routinely mobilize accounting in their daily work lives” (ibid, p. 4). In my view, this involves engaging in these people’s specifics, making an attempt to take their perspectives, their concerns, their issues, and their own theorising of their practices, however without making them my own, accepting them as ready explanations. A limited, though detailed, sample of empirical material provides opportunities for such a deeper understanding, and therefore, to quote Sutton and Staw (1995) “a small set of interviews, a demonstration experiment, a pilot survey, a bit of archival data may be all that is needed” (p. 383). The point they are making is that small samples of empirical material allow a closer engagement with the field than large samples do, enabling rich descriptions to be provided about the respondents’ assumptions, motives and beliefs.

Getting hold of those motivations and assumptions driving the actions of actors places certain demands on a researcher and his/her way of approaching the empirical field. When conducting the interviews with my respondents or reading documents produced by public authorities, this involved taking a

problematising and suspicious stance, not taking their testimonies and statements at their face value. This could be done, for example, by making comments that were, as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) puts it, “an insult to common sense” (p. 132), expressing hesitation or scepticism towards accounts that ‘normally’ are considered quite uncontroversial. This kind of questioning was achieved by expressing a reversed stance or posing ‘why not?’ questions in order to provoke a reaction, making the respondents argue for their opinions, expound on their views, and go into detail about previous given responses. Hence, the choice of methods for my thesis’ investigations was not only a question of what kind of tool or technique I would pick, but also about the role I played in it. More detailed accounts of the methods used are delineated in each of the papers, and they are summarised in the table *Summary of Thesis Problems, Methods and Theoretical Frames*, presented further below.

According to Ahrens and Chapman (2006), what distinguishes qualitative field research in accounting is not primarily a question of method, i.e. the techniques and tools used to collect one’s data, but one of methodology. Although the qualitative and the positivist-oriented researcher both are engaged in collecting and analysing documents, interviews, and observations, the concern of the former is not to describe the findings from the empirical field as evidence or untainted parts of a given ‘reality’. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) clarify:

Research rich in points usually avoids definite statements about ‘how things are’ and emphasizes the importance of looking at things in some particular way (p. 378).

Hence, it is this particular way – among potential other ways – of knowing and understanding the field that makes it relevant. This entails that the field is not a place where empirical material easily can be collected and used as a set of ‘facts’, providing neutral and objective information about ‘reality’ that ‘speaks for itself’. Rather, “empirical material always springs from some mode of understanding and not directly from how ‘reality’ really ‘is’” (ibid, p. 135). As such, empirical data can be said to enable and support the understanding, although not to lead up to it alone. A ‘field’, then, to the qualitatively oriented researcher, does not necessarily merely refer to, “a specific locale or a firm but a constellation of theoretical ideas, empirical sites and research problems” (Chua and Mahama 2011, p. 79). This means that it is from the point where these three components intersect that a field is constructed and a research argument can emerge. Thus, as concluded by Ahrens and Chapman (2006), “doing qualitative field studies is not simply empirical but a profoundly theoretical activity” (p. 820).

Even though no truth claims are made, credibility is nevertheless a virtue in qualitative research: the researcher needs to demonstrate why we should believe him/her and how the research problem has theoretical and/or practical implications (Silverman 1997). This means that the researcher has an obligation to convince the reader of the validity of the case description, and as Potter (1996) puts it: “It takes work to produce a description that is convincing” (p. 3). This does not suggest that ‘anything goes’. Quite the opposite: “The task of connecting data and theory to compelling research questions is a source of great discipline” (Ahrens and Chapman 2006, p. 820). Credible arguments are thus believed to be generated not only by demonstrating how the empirical material confirms the chosen theory but rather in the plaiting together of empirical illustrations, theoretical understandings and problematising questions. As such, they are mutually interrelated; they inform and contest each other throughout the research process, and cannot be understood in isolation. Therefore, the way of structuring the empirical material in relation to theory and problem is crucial in rendering the argument generated from field research credible. Ahrens and Dent (1998) conclude:

Rich studies are a way of presenting field material which brings theory to life through grounded examples. Sometimes such studies refute existing theory. At other times they positively state new theory. What may sound bland or even crass if stated in the abstract, assumes meaning by being connected to lived experience in organizations (p. 34).

Case studies deal with specifics – specific individuals or specific groups in specific settings. As such, they are generally cautious in their claim to generality (Ahrens and Dent 1998). According to Vaivio (2008), the aim of qualitative studies of accounting is not to produce any universal generalisations of a statistical nature, or make inferences to a broader population. In this vein, this thesis is not intended to accomplish any overall, generalisable conclusions, valid for any kind of situation. This means that it does not aspire to make any general claims about the how accounting needs to be fabricated in order to become constitutive. On the contrary, one of the key arguments that the thesis pursues – like any other qualitative field study – is to embrace specificity, emphasising that such fabrication is highly context dependent and may take a variety of forms.

However, qualitative field studies can, as pointed out by Vaivio (2008) arrive at *theoretical* generalisations: by connecting theories to empirical cases, the qualitative study might expose and examine the strengths and weaknesses of the theories, resulting in possible modifications or even rejections, which in turn might be further employed in studies of other contexts. Even though case studies deal with particularities, they are not necessarily unique (Ahrens and Dent 1998). As such, they may serve as exemplars, providing

opportunities for other researchers to compare their experiences with them and possibly make use of the theoretical insights, making them of more general relevance. Thus the theoretical points drawn from the particularities of one case study might extend beyond the study itself and, as Ahrens and Dent suggest, “leave the reader with theoretical residues which [might] have broader application” (ibid, p. 24).

Following from this reasoning, a possible topic of further research emerges from the arguments of my thesis. Even though this thesis’ conclusions originate from findings drawn from studying the private sphere of people’s everyday financial life, the question might nevertheless be raised whether they bear any relevance to studies of the organisational sphere. Since rarely touched upon in previous literature, it might be justified to ask whether the ability of organisational members to decode accounting information is taken for granted, or if actors at *any* level or arena of society – business journalists, board room members, CEOs, controllers, stockbrokers and even accounting academics (sic!) – face difficulties in interpreting and explaining accounting not only to others but also to themselves. As such, the issue of making sense of accounting might possibly be revealed as a topic of investigation that is as valid in the professional world as it is in the non-professional sphere.

In the table presented below, the papers’ respective research problems, methods and theoretical frames of analysis are summarised. As a point of clarification regarding the research problems: in some of the thesis’ papers, the problem is not always to be found in the form of a research question but as a more extensively elaborated dilemma. Here, the papers’ research problems are, for practical reasons, expressed in questions corresponding to the dilemmas as described in the papers.

Paper and Research Problem	Data Collection Methods⁵	Theoretical Frame of Analysis
<i>I: Framing Financial Responsibility</i>		
How are non-professional people with limited financial experience made to take responsibility for their personal finances?	Ten interviews with public financial education organisers Classroom in situ participation Teacher portfolio studies Public document studies	Framing theory (Benford and Snow 2000)
<i>II: Makeover Accounting</i>		
How is accounting presented to people considered impaired in their ability to make sense of numbers?	Study of twenty TV episodes Six interviews with producers, programme developers and hosts of the TV show	Representation theory (Hall 1997)
<i>III: Accounting for Inclusion</i>		
How is financial information assumed to be rendered so as to be inclusive of different kinds of users?	Twelve interviews with tele-marketing employees and low level strategists at a pension insurance company	Categorisation theory (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987)
<i>IV: Situating Financial Literacy</i>		
How is the concept of 'financial literacy' configured in the private as well as the corporate spheres?	41 interviews with board members ⁶ Regulatory document studies + Data collection paper I	New Literacy Studies (Street 1984; Gee 2000)

Tabell 1: Summary of Thesis Problems, Methods and Theoretical Frames.

⁵ The material collections described in the table are assembled at different sites and times as further accounted for in each of the papers.

⁶ The data rests on previous gathered interviews with board members of public companies elaborating on the relationship between the board, the audit committee, and the auditor. Here, the issue of their views on financial literacy is in focus.

Paper Findings and Concluding Discussion

In this concluding section, I wish to return to the aim of the thesis, that is, *to examine how accounting is made to matter*, and to delineate how the subsequent papers help, however from different angles, to address its accompanying investigative questions. The first one addresses the accounting framers' activities:

- What constitutive practices are believed to make accounting matter and what specifically do they aim to achieve?

As such, it is concerned with the techniques, methods, and means whereby accounting is alleged to be made interpretable, as well as what is expected to come out of these practices so as to accomplish that. The second question is directed towards the framers' perception of accounting:

- What assumptions about accounting do those practices imply?

Investigating the accounting framers' arguments motivating their choices of activities reveals how accounting is perceived and looked upon, and signals what makes accounting be designed in a specific way for one recipient but yet differently for another.

Based on my reading, the following sections give an account of how each of the papers attends to the thesis' aim and investigation questions, introduced by a short recapitulation of their respective empirical settings and findings.

Paper I

Framing Financial Responsibility: An Analysis of the Limitations of Accounting

The first paper, referring to the early stage of adult life, investigates how issues of private financial management are introduced to high school students. The paper analyses the classroom activities of a national high school tour, performed by a group of civil servants, forming part of a wider government-initiated financial education programme, aiming at enhancing the Swedish citizens' financial intelligence. The analysis, informed by framing theory (Benford and Snow 2000), reveals that accounting devices, such as budgets and calculations, are presumed to be of no or minor instructive assistance due to the students' practical financial inexperience. Instead, it is argued that before any number-oriented accounting practices can be introduced to the students, a choice-making discourse needs to be established. By engaging the students in exercises, filled with morally complex dilemmas, they are forced to reflect upon their own ways of reaching financial decisions, and

discuss the consequences that those decisions entail. This is believed to provide the students with a rational attitude that is claimed to be necessary for future financial decision-making activities.

Here, the accounting framers' are engaged in design practices, although not directed towards accounting as such. Rather, accounting is here worked on in terms of being deliberately ignored and *not* used, since it is said to risk making the students lose interest as a result of their unfamiliarity with accounting tools and financial concepts. The activities of the accounting framers are therefore not primarily intended to teach the students how to read and write accounting – at least not initially – but rather to endow them with a rational choice-making frame of mind, making them aware of optional ways of reaching decisions. By linking the students' interpretation of financial management to the idea of choices, and calling these choices decisions, the accounting framers attempt to establish an understanding of financial decision-making as being synonymous with making choices. This in turn is believed to serve as a foundation for the students to eventually become appreciative of accounting as a means for solving decision-making dilemmas.

The accounting framers' activities are thought to be of a preparatory kind. As such, they might be said to belong to a 'pre-accounting' phase, where accounting is temporarily abandoned in order to prepare and make the students ready for accounts. In the absence of accounting (Choudhury 1988; Catasús 2008), the activities are instead directed towards a (re-)design of the students' mind-set, claimed to constitute a precondition for students to recognise the purpose of engaging in accounting practices. This implies that accounting is perceived as requiring a rational user who understands accounting as a way of making choices. Without such an understanding, the prospects for accounting to be acknowledged as an activity or a tool to influence people's decision-making activities are assumed to be limited.

Paper II

Makeover Accounting: Investigating the Financial Edutainment of Everyday Life

The second paper relates to midterm life, and examines how a televised makeover show renders financial numerical accounts conceivable to severely indebted participants. The paper starts off from the premise that in cases where individuals are believed to be impaired in their ability to read and interpret financial numbers, communicating them in their numerical form is assumed to be of no relevance. Hence, by analysing the programme's meaning-making activities, through the lens of Hall's theory of representation (Hall 1997), the paper demonstrates how numbers, through a series of visualisation exercises, are consequently translated into other representations

corresponding to the ‘reality’ they are alleged to represent. These representations refer not only to physical objects such as expensive jewelleries or motorbikes, but most importantly to the emotions and impulses underlying the participants’ irresponsible behaviour, believed to trigger their overconsumption. Once the numbers’ ‘real’ sources have been recognised, the participants are considered prepared to learn, by means of valuation exercises, how to re-translate the ‘reality’ referents back into their initial form: numbers. Thus, it is assumed that in order to establish a basic foundation for interpreting numerical information, financial accounts require a round-trip makeover from numbers to ‘reality’ – and back into numbers again.

Here, the accounting framers’ activities are also concerned with design practices, which, in contrast with the first paper, are directed towards reconstructing the appearances of numerical accounts into taking the form of physical objects or emotional states. The practices of re-presenting financial numbers begin in a contextualisation, intended to establish a link between the numbers and the participants’ own ‘reality’. Being made aware of the numbers’ origins in ‘reality’ is claimed to make the participants *see* and *feel* what the numbers stand for, serving as a precondition for making them matter. However, and perhaps most interestingly, the accounting framers’ designing activities do not cease with establishing a convincing explanation of the numbers’ underlying problematic. Instead, the re-presenting activities continue, although with a re-directed focus towards teaching the participants, by means of budgets and comparison activities, how to understand an improved behaviour in terms of numbers. This is believed to enable the individuals to eventually read and react to financial numbers as numerical inscriptions, without having to make a contextualised detour.

The numerous design activities indicate that accounting is perceived as a practice that might be set into action, an on-going process that continuously unfolds as the programme proceeds. This suggests a renegotiation of accounting boundaries, emphasised by Miller (1998) stating that “there are no general principles by which one might be able to arbitrate as to what should be inside and what outside accounting” (p. 619). Rather, by using whatever design is at hand, the accounting framers stretch or even erase any border in the search for what might be considered suitable for re-presenting financial numbers, and most importantly, continue to do so until a ‘satisfactory’ interpretation of their meaning has been established. Hence, what constitutes accounting becomes an empirical question, ultimately motivated and determined by what is believed to make accounting matter.

Paper III

Accounting for Inclusion: Constructing User Relevance to Private Investors

The third paper addresses a dilemma belonging to the retirement phase, studying the issue of how to include different sorts of people with various needs for financial information. Informed by theories of categorisation (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987), the paper examines the means whereby telemarketing consultants at a pension insurance company determine how financial arguments are believed to be convincingly presented in order to influence the pension decisions made by different kinds of saver characters. The findings demonstrate that the company's customers are divided into two different slots based on their estimated level of financial sophistication, each accompanied by a specifically elaborated script for communicating financial information. The analysis reveals that in order for financial accounts to come across as relevant to the less sophisticated pension savers, far-reaching translations need to be made, whereas nothing of the sort is considered necessary in the case of the other group of savers.

Here, the accounting framers are involved in both identification and design practices. The identification of different pension savers is done by means of categorisation, segmenting the customers according to two kinds of saver typologies: sophisticated vs. unsophisticated savers. However, the categorisation is mainly done in order to distinguish the less sophisticated, since their interpretations of financial information are presumed to require a re-designed communication script. The paper demonstrates that in order for financial information to make a difference to people who are governed by other saving motives than economic investments, an individualised relevance detour is believed to be required. This means that the framers need to contextualise the information in accordance with the specific interests of the customers, connecting and translating it so as to matter and make sense to its intended users.

The rather uncontroversial assumptions held about the sophisticated saver are worth noting. S/he represents a rational decision-maker who is not only presumed to master financial labels and numerical, quantified representations, but who is also motivated by a rationale supporting the optimising of economic efficiency and growth, freed from ethical and moral considerations (cf. Young 2006). For such an individual, financial information is said to need no design modifications, since s/he is assumed to already have grasped the meaning and purpose of financial accounts. This suggests that accounting is perceived as having an 'ideal' design, a standard format that, if interpreted 'right', requires no context. Such a principled view of accounting entails consequences for the accounting framers' activities. It is hence from this accounting yardstick, functioning as an evaluative criterion, that the pension

savers are assessed, identified and categorised as more or less financially sophisticated. It is also, consequently, from this norm that all other accounting designs depart and are re-modified.

Paper IV

Situating Financial Literacy

The fourth paper is different. In contrast to the other papers, which take place within the private sphere of people's everyday life, this paper makes an attempt to extend the analysis to also incorporate an empirical illustration of how accounting interpretation is thought of and played out in the organisational sphere. Informed by literacy theory (Street 1984; Gee 2000), the paper analyses two empirical settings in which different framers – public authorities and regulatory bodies respectively – attend to the concept of 'financial literacy': (1) in high schools, and (2) in audit committees. The former case examines financial education for high-school students and draws on the empirical material of the first paper. The latter case investigates the efforts made to comply with the demand on incorporating a financially literate member in audit committees. Even though the two cases, arguably, constitute extremes on a continuum between illiteracy and literacy, the study reveals that the issue of financial literacy is contested in both settings. By investigating different areas of society where it has been addressed, the paper seeks to problematise prior research on the issue by disentangling the notion of financial literacy from the assumption of a singular capability that, when gained, automatically affects people's financial practices.

The paper demonstrates that the literacy framers' first focus is to identify what financial literacy is. Defining financial literacy as an individual skill-based competency serves as a point of departure from where behaviours deviating from this literacy norm can be identified, addressed, and improved. The definition helps to point out groups of people, such as in the case of high-school students, where financial literacy is said to be absent, and is assumed to mobilise edifying design practices aimed at remedying this void of skills. However interestingly, when operationalised into the high-school classroom, the definition of financial literacy is modified. Rather than being addressed as a skill-based competency, it is translated into a matter of introducing a financial choice-making attitude. In the audit committee case, financial literacy, referred to as a competency, is already assumed to have been acquired by the committee members. Consequently, in order to detail the criteria for serving as an audit committee member, the literacy definition is specified further, giving precedence to outside experience of senior management, enabling a measurable distinction to be made between different candidates. Contrary to earlier studies, the paper concludes that financial

literacy is an unstable concept that needs to be studied in practice, since what constitutes it varies with time and place.

Even though acted upon differently, both cases start off from a perception of financial literacy as a capability or an experience you either have or do not have. This implies an autonomous view of literacy, talked about in terms of *absence* or *presence*, which irrespective of time and place can be used to differentiate illiterates from literates. This absence/presence distinction is in turn determinant of how the framers' design practices are worked out. In case of its absence (high school), financial literacy is designed and constructed so as to enable people to take part and to be *included* in the financial discourse of society. Conversely, in case of its presence (audit committee), where people are already considered basically literate, financial literacy is broken down into specified constituents where (here) outside experience is given precedence, facilitating certain individuals to be disqualified and *excluded*. However, since experience is considered as a matter of individual qualifications and beyond the framers' scope of influence, no design activities are assumed to be required.

Although emphasising different aspects, framers in both cases conclude that financial literacy is something that indeed can be defined, spotted and even measured. In line with the view on accounting in the third paper, it is suggested that literacy has an autonomous, 'ideal' meaning from which deviations as well as distinctions can be singled out. However, the yardstick is used for different purposes. Thus the paper demonstrates that the concept of financial literacy is employed in both settings, although defined, problematised, and operationalised differently.

The table below delineates a summary, albeit non-exhaustive, of the core aspects presented in the thesis' papers. They all address the issue of how accounting is made to matter, although they differ in terms of accounting recipients and framers, as well as of constitutive practices and the implications that those practices entail for how accounting is perceived.

Paper	Accounting recipient	Accounting framer	Practice focus	Practice aim	Accounting implication
<i>Framing Financial Responsibility</i>	High school students	Public civil servants	Design of users	Introducing a choice-making discourse	Accounting as absent
<i>Makeover Accounting</i>	Indebted TV show participants	Makeover TV show	Design of financial numbers	Establishing links between numbers and 'reality'	Accounting as a continuous practice of re-presentations
<i>Accounting for Inclusion</i>	Pension savers	Telemarketing consultants	Identification of savers	Categorising savers based on their financial sophistication	Deviations from an 'ideal' accounting user
			Design of financial arguments/information	Constructing financial communication scripts connected to saver categories	Contextualised deviations from an 'ideal' accounting format
<i>Situating Financial Literacy</i>	High school students vs. Audit committees	Public authorities vs. Regulatory bodies	Identification of financial literacy	Distinguishing illiterates/literates for inclusion/exclusion	Autonomous view on literacy
		Public civil servants vs. Audit committee members	Design of literacy	Constructing vs. awaiting literacy	Situated view on literacy

Table 2: Summary of Thesis Papers.

Concluding Discussion

This thesis departs from the notion that accounting information indeed produces effects, although only insofar as it is constructed to be interpretable to its intended audience. The idea that accounting effects result from how its design or construction is interpreted, inevitably raises a concern of a more fundamental kind, namely: *What counts as accounting?* The issue of accounting's borders, limits, and margins (e.g. Power 1992; Miller 1998; Catasús 2001) has been widely addressed in the accounting literature. On the one hand, the numerical metaphor of accounting has been claimed to have grown so dominant that the notion that accounting *is* numbers is almost taken for granted (Morgan 1988). However, on the other end of the accounting spectrum, one finds Arrington and Francis (1993) arguing that accounting is a "ubiquitous human practice, something that all of us do in diverse cultural, social, political, and economic settings" (p. 107). The findings of this thesis confirm both of those views, and also link them together. In these very last pages, I wish to elaborate on this issue, since both views play critical roles in the process of making accounting constitutive.

The thesis' findings indicate that accounting framers seem to adhere to the idea that accounting has a principal format from which all other accounting translations depart. This format can be thought of as an ideal mode of expression, or a basic language: it has its own numerical letters, financial vocabulary, calculative grammar, and choice-making discourse. I call it, for the purpose of the story to be told, 'Accountish'. Aho (2005) claims that this form has dispersed itself through society, becoming a kind of contemporary lingua franca: a vehicular language that might be used as a means for economic communication irrespective of space, time or national mother tongues. However, in order to be spoken, read, written, and listened to, Accountish is assumed to require a user who thinks and acts as a rational decision-maker (cf. Young 2006), or a *homo economicus*⁷. When this condition is fulfilled, Accountish is believed to become interpreted and employed properly, which paves the way for bringing about effects.

Like other languages, Accountish is built upon a set of codes (cf. Llewellyn and Milne 2007) and needs in order to be practised, decoding. However, the complexity of the codes embedded in Accountish prescriptions may come out as rather inaccessible to the uninitiated since it requires a certain deciphering ability, a kind of Accountish literacy if one likes. This thesis suggests that all people are not disposed in a *homo economicus* kind of way;

⁷ "Unlike his uncle, Homo sapiens, H. economicus is unswervingly rational, completely self-ish, and can effortlessly solve even the most difficult optimization problems" (Levitt and List 2008, p. 909)

neither are they equipped with Accountish literacy. And even though they might have picked up on a few words and phrases here and there, these groups of individuals are basically characterised as more or less insensitive to Accountish scribbles (cf. Kirk and Mouritsen 1996). Hence, unless it is interpretable, Accountish is feared to become meaning-less, and hence effect-less.

Nevertheless, in order to make sense to those people who do not (yet) master its principal form of expression, Accountish might, like all languages, be translated into other ones. In order to convert Accountish into different terms, Arrington and Francis (1993) argue that it first needs to be freed from identification with its original form since such a constraint otherwise would limit the giving and taking of accounts to only those individuals competent and literate with respect to that particular language. This is assumed to require an interpreter – here in the guise of an accounting framer – whose task is to make Accountish connect to the novice in ways that infuse Accountish representations with significance, relevance and meaning. The implicit idea is, as Blumer (1969) points out, that people react to things based on the meanings that these things have for them.

These connecting kinds of translation activities are in the thesis referred to as constitutive practices, which are believed to make Accountish interpretable to a less economically rational recipient. The practices distinguish and identify the non-rational users from the rational ones (e.g. Paper III and IV), and re-design Accountish in terms of its representations (e.g. Paper II and III), link it to its ‘reality’ referents (see Paper II), and provide it with a choice-making discourse (see Paper I). This is believed to endow Accountish with a credible and substantial body from which its signs are made interpretable. Like this, the criteria for what can count as Accountish ultimately become a matter of time and space, allowing Accountish to be improvised and re-made so as to adapt to the demands and conditions of the local context of which it forms a part (cf. Miller 1998).

As concluded by the Accountish story, the constitutive potentiality of accounting is not taken as a specific quality or ability that accounting naturally possesses and that, by definition, causes people to think and act in certain ways. Rather than being perceived as a cause, the constitutive power of accounting is instead thought of as a result, an outcome or an effect, following from whether accounting is successfully assembled to make sense to its users. This entails that in the process of making accounting constitutive, something has to be done to it *before* the effect is achieved. Even though the practices of the accounting framers ultimately aim at making up a rational user who eventually might master accounting’s basic format as its native tongue, *the path of getting there requires an innovative representation detour.*

Hence, the enabling of accounting that matters does not allow any accounting borders to be closed, but rather requires that they be continuously open.

The thesis is to examine how accounting is made to matter. Such is the wording of the aim of this thesis. An aim might be thought of as ‘a giving of promise’, assuring the reader that, by the end of the day, there will be answers. Until that end, one is held accountable to pursue that promise and to satisfy the curiosity or expectations that might have arisen among some of you readers, at least at some point. Nevertheless, anyone who has ever dared to embark on the journey of writing a thesis, an article, or a novel, is well aware of all the hurdles and stumbling blocks that need to be overcome in order to fulfill what is promised. Even so, reaching these last closing pages at the very end of the day, I made an attempt to return to *my* promise, wishing and hoping to have provided some concluding insights about what is believed to make accounting matter. Whether I have managed to keep my promise or not is, I suppose, a matter of interpretation, and not for me to say. That I leave to you – the reader – to be the judge.

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