Economia Aziendale Online

Social and environmental accounting and engagement research:
Reflections on the state of the art and new research avenues

Massimo Contrafatto

PaviaUniversityPress

Social and environmental accounting and

engagement research:

Reflections on the state of the art and new research avenues

Massimo Contrafatto

Abstract

This article concerns itself with Social and Environmental Accounting (and) Reporting (SEAR) and related academic literature. In particular, the focus is on the works which have adopted an "engagement approach" to explore SEAR practices. The purpose of the paper is to analyze, through a literature-review based method, the existing literature in order to propose a pedagogic-suggestive "mapping" of the "state of the art" of the existing literature. Drawing on Thomson's (2007) work, the present paper aims to provide an illustrative-heuristic taxonomy of the current works to assist scholars, who are interested in SEAR issues, to identify gaps and contradictions which may then be addressed.

1 - Introduction

This paper concerns itself with Social and Environmental Accounting (and) Reporting and related practices. In this context the term Social and Environmental Accounting and Reporting (SEAR or SER, hereafter) is widely used to refer to corporate accounting and self-reporting processes through which quantitative and qualitative information about social and environmental effects are accounted and disclosed (Gray et al, 1995a, b; 1996; Hibbit, 2004; Contrafatto, 2004). Different media (annual reports, stand-alone social and environmental accounts, websites, etc) are used to communicate this information to a broader group of stakeholders.

Historically, SEAR has attracted the attention of academic accounting research since the mid-1970s (Gray, 2002; Rusconi, 2006; Contrafatto, 2009). Originally this attention represented an initial interest for what appeared to be a 'new topic' worthy of consideration. However, with the exception of a few pioneering experimentations, no systematic research agenda emerged. By the mid-1990s, social and environmental issues unexpectedly gained their relevance. Since then research in the field of SEAR has experienced steady growth with attention being particularly paid to issues related to external reporting (Deegan, 2002). In addition, there has been a significant increase in the number of academic researchers *embracing* the issues, in the level of consideration being given by governmental institutions (see, for example,

the EU and UN)[1] and professional (accounting) bodies, and, indeed, in the number of organizations producing different kinds of social and environmental reports[2]. According to Bebbington et al (2009: 590), who quote Wheeler and Elkington (2001), SEAR, "has moved from a *fringe* activity pioneered by socially conscious but non-mainstream companies into a credible and serious practice embraced by a number of major corporations" (emphasis added). In the last decade SEAR literature has been constantly enriched with the contributions provided by more systematic and extensive empirical research projects which have been conducted, via several methodological and theoretical frameworks, to explore social and environmental accounting and reporting practices in different sectors and/or industries across the world. As a result of this, SEAR literature has extended its boundaries to embrace areas and fields which, until a few years ago, seemed unreachable.

[1] Several legislative initiatives have been undertaken in the past few years by the European Union. In this regard refer, for example, to the EU Modernisation Directive (2003/51/EC). Furthermore, a few regulatory and legislative requirements, although unsystematic, have recently been passed in several EU countries in order to regulate organizations' activities for accounting and reporting social and environmental impacts (see the KPMG International Survey of Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting, 2005).

[2] See, for example, the KPMG International Survey of Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting, 2005.

Massimo Contrafatto
University of Bergamo, Department of Business Administration
Via dei Caniana 2, Bergamo, 24127, Italy
Email: massimo.contrafatto@unibg.it

This paper focuses on the international[3] academic SEAR literature. In particular, the present paper aims to add to the existing works which in the past (see for example Mathews 1997; Bebbington, 2001; Gray, 2002), and in more recent years (see for example Thomson, 2007), have been involved in reviewing the increasingly wide literature on SEAR. The present paper, however, explicitly considers a specific area of this literature: i.e. the works which have adopted an "engagement approach" (Adams and Larrinaga, 2007) to explore SEAR practice. The purpose of the study is to analyze, through a literature-review based method, the existing literature in order to propose a pedagogic-suggestive 'mapping' of the 'state of the art' of current works. In particular, drawing on Thomson's (2007) work, the present paper aims to achieve three tasks: i) to provide an illustrative-heuristic taxonomy of the current works to assist scholars who are interested in studying SEAR issues through 'engagement research'; ii) to highlight contradictions and gaps in current explanations; and iii) to identify some potential research avenues which could be undertaken.

The remainder of the paper is structured in three sections. The following section provides some background to conceptualize the 'engagement research' approach and to understand its rationale. In the third section, the literature which explicitly adopts an 'engagement approach' to investigate SEAR issues is analyzed in order to identify the present 'state of the art' and to propose an illustrative taxonomy of the current works. Finally, the fourth section highlights some of the *lacunae* in the existing literature. It is from the existence of these gaps that some potential research avenues are proposed in the conclusion of the analysis.

2 - Engagement Research: definition, conceptualization and rationale

The expression 'engagement research' (hereafter, ER) has been used in accounting disciplines (management accounting, social and environmental accounting, etc) largely to indicate a particular 'way' to approach and study organizational phenomena. The term 'engagement', from the French word 'engager' meaning to pledge, dates back to the early 17th century when it was used to refer to a "legal or moral obligation" towards something or somebody (Oxford Dictionary of Advanced Learners). In other words, *engage-ment*, from the verb 'engage' and the suffix 'ment', indicates 'the act of doing or being" involved in particular

initiatives. From this perspective, engagement research delineates a specific *approach*[4] to study organizational practices, including SEAR, that requires an iterative, "reflexive and empathetic" (Adams and Larrinaga, 2007: 335) involvement of the researcher with organizations and with organizational members in the process of investigation.

According to Adams and Larrinaga (2007: 335), engagement research reduces the "distance" of the researcher from the research field allowing the researcher to take the "standpoint of participants and (to) *engage* in an ongoing process of negotiation leading to a more reflexive form of research with a deeper understanding of the research process" (emphasis added). It could be argued that engagement research represents a potent approach to explore organizational phenomena, from the 'inside', and to produce a more grounded and contextualized comprehension of the rationale through which actors behave and individual/organizational action is being constructed (Adams and Larrinaga, 2007).

In the context of SEAR, engagement research has the potential to provide valuable means to enhance the descriptive and theoretical understanding of the processes and dynamics of SEAR. As Adams and Larrinaga (2007: 335) note "engagement research" is a "privileged" approach which can be used to explore SEAR at the level of organizations and its interactions with other organizational processes. Engagement research is "privileged" because it has the potential to enable "dramatic change" in organizations and organizational practices towards greater social and environmental accountability and responsibility (ibid.: 340). If this is the case, rather than being just a research strategy to instrumentally adopt in relation to a researcher's needs, engagement research represents an ambitious project that is infused with a structural research agenda[5]. Through this approach researchers and academics can actively "partake in the process of organizational change" (Adams and Whelan, 2009) towards a less unsustainable way of conducting operations and business. In other words, as asserted by Ad-

---

[3] In this paper the analysis will explicitly focus on the academic works published in international, mainly Anglo-Saxon, journals.

[4] Adams and Larrinaga (2007: 335) conceptualize engagement research as "a method" to investigate organizational phenomena. In contrast, in the present paper we define "engagement research" as an "approach", a "way" of seeing and understanding the process of research and to embrace phenomena to investigate. While engagement research implies the adoption of a few specific "interpretive research methods" (ibid.: 341), it cannot reasonably be defined a "research method" *per se*.

[5] For a discussion about the potential role of SER to 'activate change in organization and business at large' refer, for example, to Gray (2002) and Contrafatto (2009).

ams and Larrinaga (2007: 340) engagement research could be conceived "as the urgent response to the social and environmental crisis and the exploitative nature of operations by most organizations with regard to society and the environment".

In more recent years increasing calls (Adams, 2002; Gray, 2002; Parker, 2005; Dey, 2007) have been made for *more fieldwork* into SEAR, through engagement with organizational participants, as a means to explore *lacunae* and contradictions with current explanations. As a response to these arguments, a growing body of researchers have variously[6] engaged with organizations' members to study different aspects related to social and environmental reporting behaviour. In the following section existing works are reviewed in depth with the purpose of proposing an illustrative taxonomy.

3 - SEAR and Engagement Research: an illustrative literature review

"When one writes a literature review …[…]…, s/he is automatically betraying the "originals" and black boxing a series of ideas in a set of categories chosen by the writer […]. The review sets up a scenario, assigns a role to writers and their articles and, in the end, prepares the stage for the entrance of the main protagonist of the story, which is often our own articles and ideas" (Quattrone, 2004: 242-243).

In this section an illustrative review of the literature, which has involved some forms of academic engagement with organizations' members in exploring SEAR, is undertaken with the purpose of 'mapping the state of the art'. At this stage, the 'issues and focus of the analysis' are used as criteria to preliminary classify the body of literature[7] into four classes: (see figure n°1): 1) those studies which have examined mainly motives and drivers for the initiation and sustainment of SER (Buhr, 2002; O'Dwyer, 2002; Spence, 2007; Belal and Owen, 2007; Bebbington et al, 2009; Farneti and Guthrie, 2009); 2) research exploring the contextual and internal factors, including managerial attitudes, which influence the nature and extent of social and environmental reporting and might contribute or limit change in organizations (Adams, 1999; 2002; Adams and McNicholas, 2007;

Bebbington et al, 2009); 3) studies which have focused on potential and actual possibilities of SEAR to stimulate, activate and produce some kind of organizational change in practices, structures, performance and/or values (Gray et al, 1995c; Larrinaga-Gonzales and Bebbington, 2001; Larrinaga-Gonzales et al, 2001; Adams and McNicholas, 2007; Dey, 2007; Albelda et al, 2007); and 4) studies which have specifically analysed the managerial perceptions and views about SEAR and related practices (Belal and Owen, 2007; Farneti and Guthrie, 2009)[8].

In the following, each individual paper, within the above mentioned classes, is described, reviewed and analyzed.

3.1 - *SEAR, engagement research and "motives/drivers" for its initiation*

In more recent years an increasing body of researchers has sought to investigate, through interviews and meetings with managers, the motives and drivers which lead organizations to initiate and undertake SEAR. In doing so, these papers have attempted to interpret the 'motives and drivers', i.e. why organizations, in their specific institutional contexts, adopt and sustain practices of social reporting by moving beyond the analysis of social and environmental disclosures in various accounts (annual reports or stand-alone social reports).

O'Dwyer (2002), for example, conducted twenty-nine in-depth qualitative interviews in late 1997 with senior executives, including financial directors and CEOs (Chief Executive Officers), of twenty-seven Irish Plc companies to interpret managerial perceptions of the motives for corporate social disclosures (CSD). In particular, insights from legitimacy theory[9] (see for example Lindblom, 1993) were explicitly adopted to "develop a more complete, complex and critical story of the motives for CSD" (O'Dwyer, 2002: 411).

---

[6] The adverb is explicitly used to refer to the different methodological choices, focus and level of analysis that have been adopted by this research.

[7] It is important to note that the literature has not been classified in relation to the individual work but rather in relation to the issues explored in each paper. As a consequence it is possible that the same paper, which may focus on two different aspects, is classified in more than one class.

[8] By paraphrasing Lowndes (1996) each class functions as a "vignette": i.e. an illustrative and sketchy representation rather than a definite and delimited group. As "the borders of one vignette blurs with those of another" (Lowndes, 1996: 184), the elements of one class may overlap with those of another class. For example, the elements of the first class (i.e. motives and drivers for SEAR) may easily overlap with the elements of the second class (factors which impact on the nature and extent of SEAR). For an example see the paper of Bebbington et al, 2009.

[9] For a review of legitimacy theory and its use in the Social and Environmental Accounting Literature, refer to Deegan (2002) and Contrafatto (2009).

Figure 1. Graphical representation of "engagement research" papers which explore SEAR
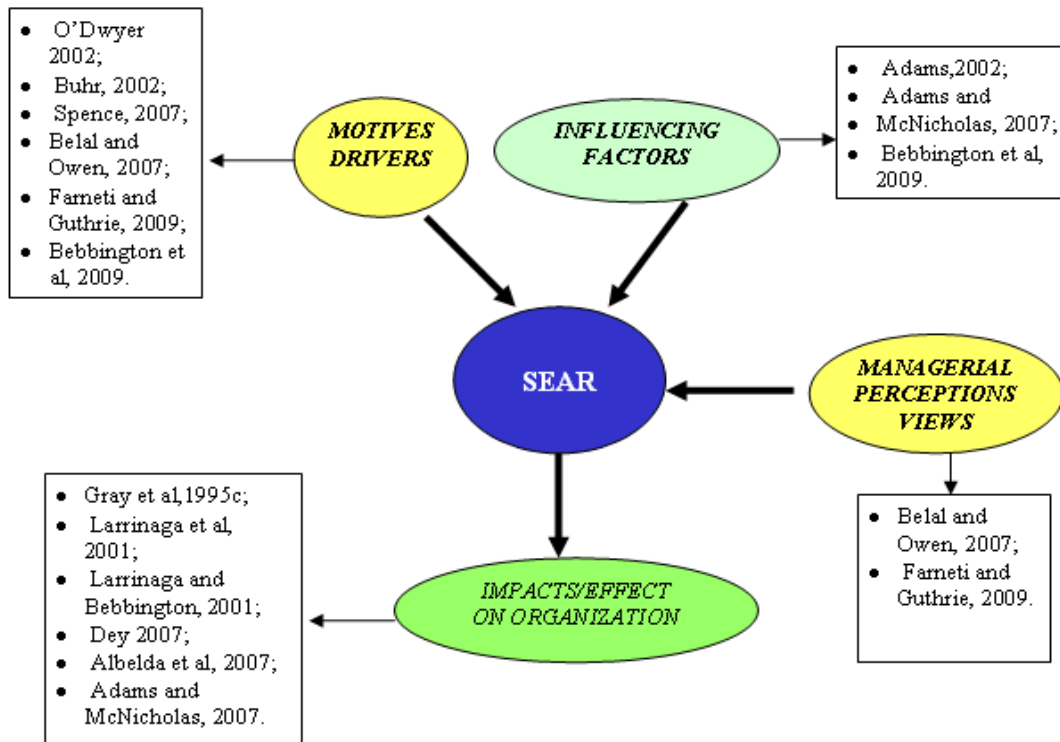
While, as noted by O'Dwyer (2002: 427), the analysis evidenced "any motives outside those of a symbolic self-interested nature", it also illuminated "the complexity and occasional confusion" (O'Dwyer, 2002: 411) at the basis of the motives which drive organizations to voluntarily report social and environmental disclosures.

On the other hand, Buhr (2002) adopted a structuration framework (see Giddens, 1984) to investigate the motives which drove two Canadian companies (operating in the pulp and paper industry) to the initiation and publication of the first environmental report. In particular, the study focused on two key research questions: "1) what has motivated these reports? And 2) By what processes have they come about?" (Buhr, 2002: 18). The empirical data, collected through open-ended interviews undertaken in 1993, was largely interpreted through the lens of the signification and legitimation dimensions of the structuration framework (Giddens, 1984). Buhr (2002) identified a plethora of motivations for the initiation of environmental reports which showed an "anxiety" for "acting" in producing the first environmental report with the aim of filling "a legitimation gap between stakeholders' perception of the corporation and

the corporation's actual performance" (Buhr, 2002: 25).

The environmental reports, therefore, were prepared and disclosed because the two companies felt a need to provide information about the actual activities and performance with regard to the natural environment in an attempt to "repair" public misperceptions and inform stakeholders (customers, employees, shareholders, investment analysts, etc). In addition, this process of searching for "a deserved state of legitimacy", was supplemented by a mimetic mechanism (for a conceptualization of the mimetic process refer to DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) through which organizations tended to imitate the actions of other peer companies in adopting practices and structures (e.g. environmental reporting) with a highly symbolic and mythic status.

Belal and Owen (2007)[10] analyzed, among others, the managerial perceptions of the motivations underlying the process of social and environmental reporting through a series of in-depth interviews with

---

[10] The paper will be discussed in more detailed in section 3.4.

senior managers of twenty-three Bangladeshi companies. Overall, the views expressed by the interviewees evidenced that the main drivers for the process of undertaking SER were related to the attempt to improve "corporate image and to manage the perceptions of economically powerful stakeholders" (Belal and Owen, 2007: 487).

Likewise, Farneti and Guthrie (2009)[11] conducted an empirical analysis to explicitly explore the preparers' views as to the motivations to disclose sustainability information. However, in contrast to Belal and Owen (2007), Farneti and Guthrie focused on a group of "better practice" organizations (Farneti and Guthrie, 2009: 89) operating in the Australian public sector. According to Farneti and Guthrie, the main purpose for disclosing sustainability information was to inform a variety of internal stakeholders, mostly employees.

A more critical perspective to investigate the motives behind SEAR was adopted by Spence (2007). The author conducted an empirical investigation, under the banner of Gadamer's (1989) historical hermeneutics (see Crotty, 1998) and via a discourse analysis methodology, to explore the motivations underlying the initiation and sustainment of SER and to ascertain the "ideological implications of these motivations" (Spence, 2007: 856). More specifically, twenty-five in-depth semi structured interviews were undertaken in 2004 with representatives (mainly managers and directors) of large corporations in the UK to investigate both the motivations for reporting social and environmental information and the "managerial perceptions of conflict between economic and socio-environmental criteria" (ibid.: 856). In particular, the study explored two main research questions: i) what are the corporate motivations underlying the decision to initiate and undertake social and environmental reporting? ii) How do managers conceive and address the conflicts between economic and socio-environmental issues?

The empirical evidence was interpreted via Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) *discourse theory* to produce a more theoretically-grounded explanation of how SER (came) comes to be a powerful organizational practice that "discursively aligns business interests with extra business interests" (ibid: 856). The paper reported that the motivations underlying the decision to produce and disclose social and environmental information were largely related to the "business case" and profit-seeking. In addition, with regard to the conflicts between society and business these were rationalized as *unavoidable* and *ineluctable* but at the same time *reconcilable* and *curable*. In other words, while interviewees recognized the existence of conflicts between economic and socio-environmental is-

sues they envisaged, in coherence with the business case, the possibility to "achieve a balance.[…]. by joining these two elements in a chain of equivalence, where they are presented as mutually re-enforcing in the broad sense" (ibid: 873).

Finally, Bebbington et al (2009) reported the results of an investigative project, undertaken in 2003, whose purpose was to explore in more detail the process and dynamics leading to the initiation of sustainable development reporting (SDR). In particular, the paper focused on "the organizational and institutional factors/drivers" and their role in driving a sample of New Zealand companies to the initiation of sustainable development reporting. As explicitly asserted by Bebbington et al, the analysis was "motivated" by the existence of "contradictions and gaps" with the current explanations about "how and why" SEAR (including SDR) is initiated. To address the existing *lacunae,* insight from new institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) was used to investigate empirical data and to produce a more theoretically-informed *narrative* of "how various factors combine at a point in time to create a dynamic for the publication of a report (Bebbington et al, 2009: 589). In other words, the paper focused on two main research questions: 1) why and how do organizations initiate a SDR? 2) What is the role/influence of institutional and organizational dynamics in the initiation of a SDR?

The analysis was undertaken at an organizational level and focused on the behaviour of a sample of six New Zealand companies that were members of the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development (NZBCSD). As reported by the authors, the decision to initiate a SDR seemed to be the result of a more "complex and subtle" process by which a range of institutional influences (i.e. regulative, normative and cognitive) combined with organizational factors (e.g. role and attitude of CEO/chair; governance processes; etc) to influence the decision making for SDR. Bebbington et al's analysis revealed that, "rather than being a *rational activity"* activated to achieve designed outcomes, SDR was an "appropriate and right thing to do" as part of the process of "fitting in" the context in which companies operated (ibid.: 612-615).

3.2 - *SEAR, engagement research and "influencing factors"*

A second group of studies has mainly focused on the (internal) corporate organizational factors which impact on the extent, nature and sophistication of SER and, therefore, on its potential to activate some forms of organizational change within organizations.

Adams (2002) conducted a series of qualitative semi-structured interviews in 1998 with managers of

---

[11] The paper will be discussed in more detailed in section 3.4.

three British and four German companies in the chemical and pharmaceutical sectors with the purpose of identifying internal organizational variables (including processes and attitudes) which might be relevant for understanding differences in terms of "quality, quantity, extensiveness and completeness of SER" (Adams, 2002: 224). In particular, the paper focused on two related research questions: i) what corporate and internal organizational factors are relevant to SER? ii) How and to what degree do these factors influence the nature and extent of SER?

The empirical findings showed that a number of internal factors need to be considered, including: i) organizational structures and policies; ii) internal processes; and iii) the attitude, views and perceptions of managers. The nature, extent and completeness of SER is likely to be influenced, for example, by: i) the involvement of communication and/or public relation departments; ii) the level of stakeholder engagement in the process of reporting; and iii) the extent to which companies follow specific guidelines (e.g. AA1000; GRI) or considers other organizations' reports (see also Adams, 1999).

In addition, Adams (2002) identified a group of factors, classified as "attitudes and views of managers", relevant for understanding SER. In particular, Adams (2002) highlighted the following factors: i) attitudes to reporting bad news; ii) views and attitudes about regulation and (social) environmental verification; iii) views on reporting in the future (e.g. change in issues reported, media of reporting, etc); and iv) perceptions about costs and benefits of social and environmental reporting[12].

Adams and McNicholas (2007)[13] adopted action research methodology to investigate, among others, factors that might impact (hinder or inhibit) the de-

velopment of SER and therefore its potential to produce effects on the organizational context. In their case study looking at an Australian government-owned authority operating in the water industry, the authors found that the following factors stimulated the initiation of SER: i) the role of organizational key actors (owner, CEO and managers) and their strong value-based commitment (also see Albelda et al, 2007); ii) the influence played by the "nature of ownership" (i.e. state-owned authority); iii) the role of Victorian Water Commission which exerted relevant pressures on the organization; and iv) the initiatives undertaken by relevant peer competitors whose behaviour contributed to activate a *mimetic process* in the organization (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991). However, in contrast to these "promoting factors", the authors identified two major "inhibiting factors": i) the lack of resources including time and economic; and ii) the lack of the necessary experience of the managers.

As mentioned above, similar results are reported by Bebbington et al (2009: 611) who identified a range of "internal organizational and contextual factors" which influence the nature of SER and the subsequent decision-making. In particular, with regard to 'promoting factors' the authors highlighted: i) the type of organizations' ownership; ii) the role exerted by the CEO and/or chairman; iii) the presence of an environmental/sustainability committee; iv) the nature of governance processes; and v) the presence of active strategic position. On the other hand, Bebbington et al (2009) reported that the absence of a clear focus and scope of the reporting process was perceived by most of the interviewed managers as an inhibiting factor. Finally, in only one case, the 'large size' of the company, which has generally been regarded as a promoting variable for reporting (Gray et al 1995a; Contrafatto, 2009), was seen as an hindering factor for the process of the initiation of SER[14].

3.3- *SEAR, engagement research and "organizational effects"*

A third group of studies mainly concentrate on the actual or potential effects that SEAR, and related practices, may produce (or do produce) on different aspects of organizations: structures, practices, performance and values.

Gray et al (1995c) focused on the actual and potential role, if at all, of environmental accounting (and accountants) to stimulate organizational change in terms of leading to "green conceptions of organiza-

---

[12] In the Italian literature about SEAR some works have recently been conducted to explicitly explore the issues related to factors which impact on SER. Contrafatto (2005), for example, conducted a case study, drawing on the theoretical model of Adams (2002), to investigate further internal organizational factors which might influence the quality, extent and nature of SER. The empirical findings highlighted the existence of a number of drivers, defined as "managerial beliefs and hopes" about SER, which, in the case study organization, were significant for understanding the features and characteristics of SER in terms of language, style, focus and emphasis of the report. The study concluded with proposing a more elaborated model than Adams's (2002) to be used as a theoretical framework to inform future research about factors and drivers which impact on SER.

[13] More detailed information about the theoretical and methodological issues will be discussed in section 3.3.

---

[14] It would be interesting to explore the contextual and corporate circumstances where the "large size" of a company represents an obstacle for the initiation and implementation of social and environmental accounting and reporting.

tions" (Gray et al, 1995c: 232). In the early 1990s the authors conducted a series of interviews with twenty-one companies in the UK and New Zealand, mostly operating in the extractive and manufacturing sectors, to explore two related issues: i) how and to which degree organizations changed in response to environmental agenda; and ii) the role of "accountants and accountings in the development of organizational environmental agendas" (ibid.: 212).

The empirical data was investigated through theoretical insights from two frameworks: a) Laughlin's (1991) model of organizational change; and b) Llewellyn's (1994) model of "organizational boundary management". In particular, Laughlin's (1991) model identifies two orders of change: i) morphostatic, not profound and deep change; and ii) morphogenetic, a form of change that "penetrates" the "genetic" (Gray et al, 1995c: 216) fibre of the organization. With regard to the first research issue (i.e. "how and to which degree organizations changed"), the study found that the response of organizations to environmental issues did not result in any morphogenetic change but in a "minor reorientation at best" (ibid: 232). However, with regard to the second issue (i.e. "the role of environmental accounting and accountants"), the authors recognized the potential role of environmental accounting and reporting in stimulating major changes in the direction of more structural (morphogenetic) changes within organizations.

Drawing on the study of Gray et al (1995c), Larrinaga-Gonzales et al (2001) conducted an empirical investigation in nine Spanish manufacturing companies with the purpose of exploring the impact of environmental accounting and reporting on organizational change. In particular, the work focused on three main research questions: i) how do organizations respond to the environmental agenda, if at all? ii) Which kind of change occurs? iii) Do Gray et al'(1995c) findings apply in a different business context (like the Spanish one) characterized by different values (e.g. secrecy)? The data was collected through several research methods: i) fifteen semi-structured interviews with senior managers and corporate environmental officers, carried out in April/May 1997; ii) questionnaires; and iii) document analysis.

The empirical evidence was analysed using insight from Laughlin's (1991) model of organizational response to accounting interventions. Larrinaga et al (2001) found that the effects of environmental reporting on organizational change in their case studies were not structural (morphogenetic). The findings of this paper, therefore, seem to confirm those reached by Gray et al (1995c) that environmental accounting produced only morphostatic changes in the organizations studied.

In contrast to the above described studies that analyse the behaviour of a cluster of organizations in different industries, the work of Larrinaga and Bebbington (2001) investigated the role of environmental accounting in promoting organizational changes by explicitly focusing on an individual case and in a specific industry. In particular, extensive field work with a large Spanish electricity utility was undertaken over a two year period (from 1992 to 1994) to explore (in depth) the dynamics and effects of the introduction of environmental accounting practices as a part of the "greening project". More specifically three related issues were explored: i) how and which initiatives did the company adopt to respond to the environmental agenda? ii) What effects did environmental accounting interventions produce on organizational change? iii) What factors and elements contributed to or detracted from the success of the "greening project"? Data was collected through a series of methods including: i) seventeen semi-structured interviews with personnel of the Environmental Management Department and Accounting Department; ii) casual conversations and observations; and iii) analysis of company documents (e.g. annual reports and other non-financial documents).

The empirical evidence, interrogated through the lens of the theoretical models of "organizational change" (Laughlin, 1991; Llewellyn, 1994; Duncan and Thomson, 1998) and "institutional appropriation" (Bebbington, 1999), showed that in the case study "accounting interventions into the life of the organization failed to stimulate *substantive* organizational changes" (Larrinaga and Bebbington, 2001: 287, emphasis added). While there were some improvements in environmental performance, the environmental agenda and environmental accounting did not produce any structural or profound changes in the "underlying rationale of the organization" which remained firmly and exclusively anchored to "generate profit, primarily from expanding energy sales" (ibid.: 287). According to Larrinaga and Bebbington (2001) the "greening project" failed to produce the *desirable (or necessary)* "substantial changes" in the case study essentially for two reasons:

i) the necessary "assemblage of events, structures and conditions that would have made" the change realizable and effective did not occur (ibid: 287);

ii) the environmental accounting did not act as a "binding mechanism" (Llewellyn, 1994) and did not "reproduce the underlying rationale of the organization" (Larrinaga and Bebbington, 2001: 287).

The potential of SER to act as a catalyst for change in organizations' performance and practices was the focus of the action research study undertaken by Adams and McNicholas (2007). In particular, they focused on "the potential of the sustainability report-

ing process to lead to *improved sustainability performance*[15] (ibid.: 398, emphasis added).

The empirical findings collected through different methods (observations, meetings with organizational members and interviews) were analyzed using the integrated model of planned change developed by Lewin (1947). In contrast to previous studies about the impacts of SER on organizations (see for example, Larrinaga et al, 2001), Adams and McNicholas (2007) found some *tangible* effects produced by SER on organizational life. As outlined by the authors ".[…]. the process of developing a sustainability reporting framework did result in some organizational change. The most significant impact was the integration of sustainability issues into the strategic planning process and an increased focus on KPIs (i.e. Key Performance Indicators) not previously reported" (ibid.: 399). Furthermore, in their case study (i.e. a government-owned authority), sustainability reporting played a relevant role as it acted as a facilitator of change in the organizational culture and value system by "introducing and reinforcing sustainability principles throughout the organization" (Adams and McNicholas, 2007: 398).

Dey (2007), similarly to Adams and McNicholas (2007), also accounted for tangible, although unintended and unexpected, impacts on different aspects of an organization's life: structure, performance and value system. Dey (2007) conducted an ethnographic study to investigate the outcomes of social accounting intervention in Traidcraft Plc, a UK-based fair-trade organization during the mid-1990s. Drawing on the theories of change/appropriation, the author, specifically, sought to address two issues: i) the potential of social accounting to mobilize or to contribute to change; and ii) the consequences on organizational change of social accounting. Dey (2007: 442) found that social accounting "played a crucial –and perhaps pivotal- role in driving through organizational change".

In Traidcraft there was strong evidence of deinstitutionalization (for a conceptualization of deinstitutionalization refer to Oliver, 1992) and organizational transformation in the "disappearance" of what Dey (2007) called the "Old Traidcraft" with its moral-based value system and the "emergence" of the "new" entity with its commercial and financial reality. As a result of the process of deinstitutionalization, there was not only a modification in the organization's overall structure but as well a profound change in the value system and interpretive schemes which differentiated the Old from the New Traidcraft. In this process, social accounting "played a significant role in shaping organizational change" (Dey, 2007: 443).

Finally, in contrast to previous studies which have considered SEAR practices, Albelda et al (2007) specifically investigated the role and the effects of environmental management systems (EMS) on promoting organizational change. In particular, the study focused on the Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) and explored its potential to act as a *catalyst* for the embedment of environmental values and issues that promote organizational change towards improved environmental performance (Albelda et al, 2007). More specifically, four catalysts for change were derived from the analysis of EMAS: i) training and awareness building; ii) continuous environmental improvement; iii) integrating stakeholders' interests; and iv) organizational learning (Albelda et al, 2007: 405).

The analysis was conducted at the level of *industrial sites* rather than organizations and involved ten Spanish sites that had obtained EMAS registration. Data and information were collected through: i) semi-structured interviews with environmental managers and management accountants, undertaken between 2004 and 2005; ii) analysis of corporate documents (e.g. environmental statements; newsletters, etc); and iii) observations during the empirical investigation. As reported by Aldelda et al (2007), the empirical evidence highlighted the potent role of EMAS to promote the embedding process of environmental principles and consequently to produce tangible effects towards enhanced environmental performance in the EMAS sites.

3.4 - *SEAR, engagement research and "managerial views and perceptions"*

A fourth group of studies has specifically focused on managerial perceptions and views about SEAR and related issues such as: i) the current state and future prospects; and ii) the relevance of social/environmental accounting and auditing standards.

Belal and Owen (2007), as seen above, carried out a series of qualitative interviews with managers from twenty-three large multinational and domestic (private and public) Bangladeshi companies (across different industries such as pharmaceutical, chemical, oil and gas, etc), during the period between December 2001 and March 2002, to investigate managers' perceptions about SEAR, its current status and its related practices. The purpose of the analysis was to ascertain, through a critical examination of managerial perceptions, "some of the driving forces behind the current state of, and future prospects for, CSR (*Corporate Social Reporting*) in the Bangladeshi context" (Belal and Owen, 2007: 473, emphasis added). In particular, interviews focused on four key issues:
i)   managerial perceptions about the need and motivations for social and environmental reporting;

---

[15] For a conceptualization of the notion of "sustainability and sustainable development" refer to Bebbington, 2001.

ii) managers' views about which groups comprise key stakeholders and their role in the reporting process;

iii) the perceived relevance and pertinence of existing social accounting and auditing standards;

iv) managerial perceptions of the key drivers for current and future reporting practices.

In particular, as noted by the authors, while the main motivation driving the current process of social and environmental reporting was represented by the attempt to manage and increase organizational legitimation, some of the key drivers for future reporting practices seemed to be the increasing pressure from external forces (i.e. pressures from international buyers and requests from parent companies) and the adoption of international social accounting and auditing standards. With regard to the latter point, the authors reported serious concerns about the effects of a "passive compliance strategy" with standards and codes issued for the needs of western developed countries, and its limitations in producing real and positive changes in corporate behaviour and performance (Adams and Larrinaga, 2007).

In addition, in 2007, Farneti and Guthrie (2009) conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with those involved in the processes of sustainability reporting (i.e. preparers) of a group of Australian public sector organizations to explicitly investigate their views and attitudes about sustainability reporting and related practices. Specifically, the analysis focused, among others, on the following themes: i) perceptions of the motivations for disclosing sustainability information (SI); ii) media adopted to communicate SI; iii) the role played by "key individuals" in promoting the initiation of sustainability reporting; and iv) organizational units involved in the process of sustainability reporting.

In particular, with regard to these issues the following findings were reported:

i) the main *perceived* motivation for disclosing SI was to inform the "internal stakeholder";

ii) different media, and not only the annual report, were used to report;

iii) the essential role exerted by those individuals (generally one) who steered the sustainability reporting process from inside;

iv) the environmental units were those organizational structures mostly involved in the process of sustainability reporting.

3.5 - *SEAR and Engagement Research: an illustrative taxonomy*

In the sections described above, an *illustrative* review of the papers that involve some form of engagement with organizational participants in the process of initiation, preparation and development of SER has been

undertaken. The purpose of the analysis has been to: i) sketch the issues investigated; ii) identify the theoretical and methodological choices undertaken; iii) outline the countries and sectors of analysis; and iv) report the findings obtained.

In the following, an illustrative taxonomy will be proposed to classify the existing works (see table 1). It should be noted that, this is explicitly a personal interpretation and codification of a selection of articles within the literature and as such devoid of any *scientific truth*. Drawing on Thomson's (2007) experimentation[16] this classification will be made under the following themes:

i) article topic(s): papers are classified and grouped in relation to the themes which are addressed (e.g. environmental accounting/reporting, sustainability accounting and reporting, corporate social reporting/disclosure, etc);

ii) focus of analysis: works are grouped in relation to the specific issues that are explored;

iii) theoretical and evaluatory framework: the purpose is to highlight the theories or theoretical models which have been (eventually) adopted for the empirical investigation;

iv) methodology and methods: information about the methodological choice and research methods is reported;

v) context of the analysis: geographical location, sector, industry and timescale;

vi) level of analysis: works are classified in relation to the specific level of resolution;

vii) results and findings: the main results and findings of each paper will be reported.

i) Article Topic

Under this label papers are classified and grouped in relation to the subject and themes which are addressed by each study: e.g. environmental accounting; environmental reporting; sustainability accounting and reporting; etc. In general, from the analysis there is a prevalence of papers (eight out of thirteen) that address the topic relating to the processes of *reporting/disclosing* social and environmental information. Only four papers, in contrast, have explicitly explored the theme related to the processes of social and environmental *accounting*. Finally, just one paper (i.e. Albelda et al, 2007) has considered the subject connected with the environmental *management* system.

In addition, it is possible to see a relationship between the time period when the research was conducted and the topic of the analysis.

---

[16] Thomson (2007) undertook an extensive review of academic articles within the wider sustainability accounting literature with the purpose to represent, through mapping, the current state of the art of knowledge and understanding in the sustainability accounting terrain.

Table 1. Taxonomy of "engagement research" papers which explore SEAR.

	TOPIC	FOCUS	THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK	METHODOLOGY AND METHODS	CONTEXT - *LOCATION* - *INDUSTRY* - *TIME*	LEVEL OF ANALYSIS	RESULTS AND FINDINGS
Gray et al, 1995c	Environmental accounting and (accountant) and organizational behaviour.	How and to what degree organizations change in response to environmental agenda and accounting?	Models of organizational behaviour and change: i. Laughlin (1991); ii. Llewellyn (1994).	- Field work methodology; - Interviews and questionnaires.	- UK and New Zealand; - Extractive and processing sectors; - Early 1990s.	Behaviour of a cluster/sample of organizations.	The response of organizations to environmental issues did not result in any morphogenetic (deep) change.
Larrinaga et al, 2001	Environmental accounting and (accountant) and organizational behaviour.	How do organizations respond to environmental agenda? Which type of change?	Models of organizational changes: i. Laughlin (1991); ii. Gray et al (1995c).	- Field qualitative methodology (descr-interpretive); - Interviews, content analysis and questionnaires.	- Spain; - Manufacturing companies; - Mid- 1990s.	Behaviour of a group of organizations in a specific context.	The effects of environmental reporting on organizational change were not structural-morphogenetic thus confirming Gray et al (1995c)'s results.
Larrinaga and Bebbington, 2001	Environmental Accounting and organizational behaviour.	What effects did environmental accounting interventions produce on organizational change? What factors and elements contributed to or detracted from the success of the "greening project"?	Models of organizational change and institutional appropriation: i. Laughlin (1991); ii. Llewellyn (1994); iii. Duncan and Thomson (1998); iv. Bebbington (1999).	- Field case study methodology; - Interviews, casual conversations, observations and document analysis.	- Spain; - Electricity sector (utility); - Early 1990s (1992-1994).	Behaviour of an individual/single case study, represented by a Spanish electricity utility.	Accounting interventions failed to stimulate *substantive* organizational changes. Two reasons were provided: i) absence of the necessary assemblage of events, structures and conditions; ii) environmental accounting did not act as a binding mechanism.
Adams, 2002	Corporate Social and Ethical Reporting (CSER) and its nature, extensiveness and quality.	What and to which extent do some internal (organizational) factors influence the nature, extent and quality of CSER?	No theoretical framework is explicitly adopted to theorize empirical findings.	- Field qualitative methodology; - Interviews and observations.	- UK and Germany; - Chemical and pharmaceutical sectors; - 1998.	Cluster of 7 organizations.	Many internal factors impact on the nature and extent of CSER: i) organizational structures and policies; ii) internal processes; and iii) the attitude and perceptions of managers.

O'Dwyer, 2002	Corporate Social Disclosure (CSD) and its motives.	Why do companies disclose social and environmental information?	Legitimacy Theory: - Lindblom (1993).	- Field qualitative methodology; - Interviews.	- Ireland; - Cross-industry; - 1997.	Behaviour of a group of 27 organizations.	While CSD could be part of legitimation strategy this is "misguided" as perceived as incapable to achieve a legitimacy state.
Buhr, 2002	Environmental Reporting (ER) and motives for its initiation.	What has motivated the initiation of environmental reports? By what processes have they come about?"	Structuration theory: - Giddens (1984).	- Field case study methodology; - Interviews.	- Canada; - Pulp and Paper industry; - 1993.	Behaviour of two companies operating in the pulp and paper industry.	Environmental reports were prepared and disclosed in the attempt both to "repair" public misperceptions and inform stakeholders.
Adams and McNicholas, 2007	Sustainability Reporting (SR), influencing factors and organizational change.	What is the potential of SR to promote change in organizational performance? Which factors might impact (hinder or inhibit) on SR?	Integrated model of planned change: - Lewin (1947).	- Action research methodology; - Interviews, meetings and observations.	- Australia; - Water Industry (Governed owned authority); - 2003.	Behaviour of one single organization. Analysis of the intra-organizational dynamics.	The introduction of SR produced tangible effects on organizational life, including profound impact on the culture and value systems.
Dey, 2007	Social Accounting Bookkeeping (SAB) and organizational change.	How and why SAB was undertaken? How did SAB impact on organizational change?	- Theories of change and institutional appropriation (Larrinaga and Bebb, 2001); - Institutional theory Oliver (1992).	- Ethnographic methodology; - Interviews and observations.	- UK; - Social enterprise organization; - 1994/95 and 1997.	Behaviour of one single organization and intra-dynamics analysis.	SAB played a crucial role in driving and shaping organizational change. As a result tangible, although unintended effects on organizations (performance, structures, values) took place.
Albelda et al, 2007	Environmental Management Systems (EMS) and organizational change.	What is the role of EMS in promoting organizational change?	EMAS (Eco-Management and Audit Scheme) is used as theoretical model.	- Field qualitative methodology; - Interviews, observations and documents analysis.	- Spain; - Cross-sectional; - 2004-2005.	Analysis was conducted at level of industrial sites rather organization.	EMAS has/had a potent role in promoting the embedding process of environmental principles and to produce effects toward enhanced environmental performance.
Spence, 2007	Social and Environmental Reporting (SER) and its motives.	What are the motivations for SER? How do managers conceive the conflicts between economic and socio-environmental issues?	Discourse Theory: - Laclau and Mouffe (1985).	- Discourse Analysis methodology; - Interviews.	- UK; - Large corporations; - 2004.	Analysis of a cluster of organizations.	Motivations underlying the decision for SER were largely related to the "business case". Conflicts between economic and socio-environmental issues are ineluctable but reconcilable.

Belal and Owen, 2007	Corporate Social Reporting (CSR) and managerial views and perceptions.	What are the managerial perceptions about CSR and related issues (e.g. motivations, stakeholders engagement, accounting and auditing standards, drivers of the current and future reporting)?	No theoretical framework is explicitly adopted to theorize empirical findings.	- Field qualitative methodology; - Interviews with managers.	- Bangladesh; - Large multinational and domestic companies across industries; - 2001-2001.	Analysis of the managerial views.	Main motivation driving current CSR is represented by the attempt to manage legitimation. Key drivers for future reporting are: i) increasing pressures from external forces; ii) adoption of international social accounting and auditing standards. Inadequacy of current standards and codes to produce "real change" in corporate behaviour.
Farneti and Guthrie, 2009	Sustainability Reporting (SR) and managerial views.	What are the managerial views about SR and related issues (e.g. motivations, media for disclosing, role played by key drivers, etc)?	No theoretical framework is explicitly adopted to theorize empirical findings.	- Field qualitative methodology; - Interviews with preparers.	- Australia; - Public Sector organizations; - 2007.	Analysis of the managerial views.	The main perceived motivation for disclosing was to inform internal stakeholders. Different media are used to report. SR process is championed by key individuals inside organizations. Environmental units are those structures mostly involved.
Bebbington et al, 2009	Sustainable Development Reporting (SDR) and drivers for its initiation.	Why and how do organizations initiate a SDR? What is the role/influence of institutional and organizational dynamics in the initiation of a SDR?	New Institutional Theory: - DiMaggio and Powell (1991); - Scott (1995).	- Field qualitative methodology; - Interviews, observation and meeting participations.	- New Zealand; - Large companies across different industries; - 2003.	Analysis is at the organizational level of a group of six companies.	The decision to initiate SDR was the result of a "complex and subtle" process by which a range of institutional influences (regulative, normative and cognitive) combined with organizational factors (e.g. role/attitude of CEO, governance processes, etc) to create the dynamics for SDR

For example, research conducted in the early 1990s seems to privilege the 'environmental' topic either in the form of reporting or accounting while those studies undertaken after the mid-1990s also include the 'social and/or sustainability' theme. It is plausible to suggest that these patterns rather than being casual may reflect specific "fashions" (Thomson, 2007) and emphasis which over time has been placed upon either the environmental or the socio-environmental and ethical issues. While the early and mid-1990s saw the advancement in the interest for mainly environmental issues, with the turn of the decade 'social aspects' regained their prominence beside the environmental agenda.

ii) Focus of the analysis

As we have seen above (section 3.1) existing works could be grouped into four groups, in relation to the "focus of analysis". Some of these works have examined either the internal organizational variables which influence the nature, extent, quality and extensiveness of SER, or the motives which drive organizations to initiate, implement or sustain the process of social and environmental accounting and accountability. Further, other researchers have concentrated on the potential and actual effects of social accounting on different aspects of organizational life: structures, practice, performance and culture. Finally, other works have explicitly investigated 'managerial perceptions and views' about SEAR and its attributes.

iii) Theoretical frameworks

Relatively speaking, several theoretical frameworks have been explicitly adopted by (social) accounting scholars to explore, through an engagement approach, SEAR and related issues. In general, there is a prevalence of studies which have drawn on theories of organizational change, for example: i) Lewin's (1947) theory of planned change; ii) Laughlin's (1991) model of organizational transition and transformation; iii) Llewellyn's (1994) model of organizational boundary management; and iv) theories of *institutional appropriation* (see Larrinaga and Bebbington, 2001). Insight from these theories have been used to ascertain whether and to what degree social and environmental accounting and reporting interventions produce any substantial changes in organizational realms such as practice, structures, performance and value systems. In two cases (i.e. Bebbington et al, 2009; Dey, 2007) institutional insights have been explicitly used to investigate respectively the dynamics (drivers) leading to the initiation of SER and the effects of social accounting intervention on existing organizational systems.

In addition, two other theories (i.e. structuration and legitimacy) have been adopted to interpret the motives for the decision to initiate and undertake social environmental reporting and disclosure. In only one case, a more critical perspective was used to analyse the issues related to SER. In particular, drawing on the discourse theory framework, Spence (2007) investigated the motivations underlying SER in order to ascertain the "ideological implications" of these motivations (Spence, 2007: 856).

Finally, in three circumstances no theoretical frameworks were used *a priori* to analyse the empirical evidence. Rather, this empirical evidence was used as a basis to elaborate theoretical models (see for example Adams, 2002) to support the theoretical understanding of SEAR, its factors and underlying dynamics.

iv) Methodology and Methods

A wide array of field work methodologies, spanning from extensive qualitative analysis (e.g. Gray et al, 1995c) to in-depth ethnographic (e.g. Dey, 2007) and action research studies (Adams and McNicholas, 2007), were adopted to carry out the empirical investigation. In terms of research methods all the works, which have been reviewed, have used interviews as a primary mean to gather data and information. In general interviews have been conducted with the managers of the departments directly or indirectly involved in SEAR (e.g. Environmental Affair Department, Accounting Department, etc). In addition, other research methods (such as observations, visits and meeting participations, documents analysis and questionnaires) have largely been adopted to supplement and enrich the information and data gathered through interviews.

v) Context of the analysis

Under this category papers have been classified in relation to three aspects: i) country where the analysis was conducted; ii) industry; and iii) time period of the analysis.

With regard to the location of the analysis, a prevalence of studies (9 out of 13) were conducted in English-speaking countries, with most of the research localized in the UK and Australia/New Zealand. In only one case, research has been conducted in the context of North America, specifically Canada. A few studies were localized in continental Europe, mainly Spain. In addition, only one paper considered the context of developing countries such as Bangladesh.

With regard to the industry-factor most of the studies considered large corporations that operated in the manufacturing and processing sectors (e.g. chemical, pharmaceutical, extracting, etc). However, attempts have been made to extend the analysis to include entities that operate in other sectors/contexts, such as the public sector (e.g. Farneti and Guthrie, 2009), the public utility (e.g. Larrinaga and Bebbington, 2001) and social economy (e.g. Dey, 2007).

Finally, with regard to the time period, the analysis has covered the whole period starting from the early 1990s (e.g. Gray et al, 1995) until the mid-

2000s. As the findings cover such a long time period, these represent a useful database through which to investigate the evolution and modification of SEAR patterns over time and the relevance and incidence, if at all, of the "temporal factor".

vi) Level of the analysis

With the exception of the study conducted by Albelda et al (2007), which focused on the *industrial site* rather than organizations, most of the existing works have explored SEAR practices at the organizational level of either individual or group of organizations. However, a few works (e.g. Adams and McNicholas, 2007; Dey, 2007) have attempted to explore the intra-organizational dynamics related to the process of initiation and implementation of SEAR as well.

vii) Results and Findings

The findings reported by the different studies highlight the *heterogeneity, complexity and contradictory nature* of SEAR and related practices. The task of providing a systematic and overall framework within which to synthesize the obtained results has not been easy. However, an attempt has been made to identify common patterns and reasons for the observed contradictory explanations.

   SEAR seems to be a phenomenon influenced by a multitude of organizational, contextual and institutional factors. These factors drive decision-making about the initiation of SEAR but as well the characteristics (nature and extent) of SEAR. Although difficult to empirically explore, it is this "reflexive and iterative" interplay between these institutional, contextual and organizational drivers that creates the conditions for the "ignition" of the process of SER (Bebbington et al, 2009). In addition, these factors exert a relevant impact on the nature and quality of SEAR and ultimately on its relevance to promote change in the organizational realm. It is plausible to assert that the comprehension, though partial and limited, of this "assemblage of factors" (Duncan and Thomson, 1998) represents a *sine qua non* to investigate SEAR, its underlying motives and its actual/potential effects towards improved social and environmental performance. It could be suggested that the combining effects of these factors and their impact on SEAR may explain some of the *contradictions* which emerge in the current literature of social and environmental accounting. If this is so, more work should be conducted to explore in a more contextualized way the conditions that stimulate or constrain SEAR and its possibilities to promote benign effects on organizations and society at large.

4 - Conclusions and Possible Future Research

In the present paper, in response to the "invitation" made by Thomson (2007), a specific area of SEAR literature has been reviewed in depth. In particular, a selection of existing works that have adopted an "engagement approach" to explore SEAR practices have been analyzed. The purpose of this article was to map the 'state of the art' and to propose an *illustrative-heuristic,* rather than an *exhaustive-definitive,* classification to "represent knowledge" and to stimulate the "construction of knowledge" (Thomson, 2007) through which to support researchers in identifying issues and gaps which may be addressed. In other words, by paraphrasing Thomson (2007), this classification performs a pedagogic function to assist the *conservation* and *sharing* of knowledge, and to increase the understanding of SEAR.

   As can be observed by the above review and classification (see table 1), although engagement research in the field of social and environmental accounting has increased over the past few years, there are still gaps and issues which need to be further explored with future research. Therefore, a few suggestions will be proposed.

   Firstly, some research may be oriented to investigate further the issues related to the potential and actual role of SEAR to mobilize profound organizational change. In particular, more contextualized, indepth and prolonged research projects should be conducted in order to investigate *how* and *to what extent* the different organizational and institutional factors combine to create the 'pre-conditions' to stimulate more benign and profound changes in organizations. In doing so, the research projects would contribute to the existing literature by addressing some of the contradictions with current explanations about the organizational effects of SEAR interventions.

   Secondly, there is a need to further investigate managerial attitudes, views and perceptions about SEAR and related issues in order to explore *whether* and *to what degree* these have a relevant impact on the decision-making about SEAR and its nature. In the writer's opinion, there is a need to move beyond the existing mostly descriptive works which have reported a detailed analysis of the managerial perceptions, without, however, proposing more theoretically-informed explanations of empirical findings.

   Thirdly, there is an urgent need to extend the location in which research has been conducted. As seen above, there is a prevalence of research localized in the English speaking countries (UK, Australia, New Zealand). Therefore, research in the field of social and environmental accounting conducted in different contexts, other than Anglo-Saxon, characterized by different conceptions about business and the role of or-

ganizations within it, would be beneficial. In particular, such research projects could be localized not only in Western Europe, but also in Eastern Europe and in the context of emerging and developing countries. In addition, it is suggested that there is a need for more comparative (or multi-national) studies conducted in different contexts to investigate *how* and *to what extent* the 'country of origin' of the entities impacts upon the nature and role of SEAR.

Finally, more attention should be devoted to alternative sectors and entities and their contribution towards sustainable development. With regard to the sector, more research drawing on different theoretical and methodological frameworks, should be conducted in the non-profit (e.g. social economy, social communities, cooperatives) and public sectors, given the prominent role that these have in the economic and social development of current societies. With a similar view, future research projects should consider alternative entities rather than large organizations, mostly corporations. It is also suggested that there is an 'urgent' need to extend the analysis to include the behaviour of medium and small enterprises, to investigate the managerial and entrepreneurial attitudes, given the prominence that these have in the creation of economic and social wealth. This is of particular importance in the Italian context whose industrial and economic structure is characterized by the prevalence of small-medium enterprises (Onida, 2004).

In this concluding section, relying on the classification reported above, possible future research avenues have been suggested. The purpose of this analysis has not been to prepare an exhaustive list of the issues to be addressed but rather to provide, metaphorically, the researchers of *Economia Aziendale* with a 'description of the points of interest' (i.e. *what*) and 'a road map' *(*i.e. *how)* to decide which 'route' to take. Similar to a tourist who wishes to visit and discover a city, the choice of SEAR 'issues' (i.e. what) to explore and the 'ways' (i.e. how) to conduct the analysis will be ultimately influenced by the personal preference, aspiration and *credo* of each researcher.

References

Adams C. (1999), *The nature and processes of Corporate Reporting on ethical issues*, CIMA, London, UK.

Adams C. (2002), Internal organizational factors influencing corporate social and ethical reporting, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 2 [223-250].

Adams C. and Larrinaga-Gonzales C. (2007), Engaging with organizations in pursuit of improved sustainability accounting and performance, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 [333-355].

Adams C. and McNicholas, P. (2007), Making a difference: sustainability reporting, accountability and organizational change, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 [382-402].

Adams C. and Whelan G. (2009), Conceptualising future change in the sustainability reporting, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 1 [118-143].

Albelda-Perez E., Correa-Ruiz C. and Carrasco-Fenech F. (2007), Environmental management systems and management accounting practices as engagement tools for Spanish companies, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 [403-422].

Bebbington J. (1999), Accounts of, and Accounting for, Sustainable Development, Unpublished PhD dissertation, Dundee, UK.

Bebbington J. (2001), Sustainable development: a review of the international development, business and accounting literature, *Accounting Forum,* Vol. 25, No. 2 [128-157].

Bebbington J., Higgings C. and Frame B. (2009), Initiating sustainable development reporting: evidence from New Zealand, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 4 [588-625].

Belal A.R. and Owen D.L. (2007), The views of corporate managers on the current state of, and future prospects for, social reporting in Bangladesh: an engagement based study, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 [472-494].

Buhr N. (2002), A structuration view on the initiation of environmental reports, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 13, No.1 [17-38].

Collins Cobuild Edition (2003), Advanced Learner's English Dictionary, HarperCollins Publishers, Glasgow, UK.

Commissione delle comunità europee (2003), *Modernisation Directive, 2003/51/EC.*

Contrafatto M. (2004), Il corporate social accounting and reporting: uno sguardo alla letteratura internazionale, in G. Rusconi and M. Dorigatti (eds.), *Teoria Generale del Bilancio Sociale ed applicazioni pratiche*, collana "Persona, imprese e società", Vol. 2, Franco Angeli, Milano [70-91].

Contrafatto M. (2005), Il Corporate Social Reporting e i suoi fattori interni: teoria ed analisi empirica, in G. Rusconi and M. Dorigatti (eds.), *Etica d'impresa*, collana "Persona, imprese e società", Vol. 5, Milano, Franco Angeli [205-241].

Contrafatto M. (2009), *Il social and environmental reporting e le sue motivazioni: teoria, analisi empirica e prospettive*, Giuffrè Editore, Milano Italy.

Crotty M. (1998), *The foundations of Social Research*, Sage publications, London, UK.

Deegan C. (2002), The legitimizing effect of social and environmental disclosures: a theoretical foundation, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 3 [282- 311].

Dey C. (2007), Social Accounting at Traidcraft plc: A struggle for the meaning of fair trade, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 3 [423-445].

DiMaggio P. and Powell W. (1991), Introduction, in W. Powell & P. DiMaggio (eds.), *The New institutionalism in organizational analysis*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL [1-38].

Duncan O. and Thomson I. (1998), Waste Accounting and Cleaner Technology: A Complex Evaluation, *Asian Pacific Interdisciplinary Research in Accounting Conference Proceedings*, Osaka, 4-6 August.

Farneti F. and Guthrie J. (2009), Sustainability reporting by Australian public sector organisations: Why they report, *Accounting Forum*, Vol. 33, [89-98].

Gadamer H.G. (1989), Truth and Method, Continuum, London, UK.

Giddens A. (1984), *The constitution of society*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.

Gray R. (2002), The Social Accounting Project and Accounting Organization and Society: Privileging Engagement, Imaginings, New Accountings and Pragmatism over Critique, *Accounting Organizations and Society*, Vol. 27, No. 7 [687-708].

Gray R., Kouhy R. and Lavers S. (1995a), Corporate social and environmental reporting: a review of the literature and a longitudinal study of UK disclosure, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 [47-77].

Gray R., Kouhy R. and Lavers S. (1995b), Methodological themes: constructing a research database of social and environmental reporting by UK company, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 [78-101].

Gray R., Owen D. and Adams, C., (1996), *Accounting and accountability: changes and challenge in corporate social and environmental reporting*, Prentice-Hall, Hemel Hempstead, UK.

Gray R., Walters J., Bebbington J. and Thomson I. (1995c), The Greening of Enterprise: An Exploration of the (non) Role of Environmental Accounting and Environmental Accountants in Organisational Change, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* Vol. 6, No. 3 [211- 239].

Hibbit C. (2004), *External environmental disclosure and reporting by large European companies,* Limperg Instituut, Amsterdam, Holland.

Hibbitt C. and Collison D. (2004), Corporate Environmental Disclosure and Reporting Developments in Europe, *Social & Environmental Accounting Journal*, Vol. 24, No. 1 [1-11].

KPMG (2005), *International Survey of Corporate Responsibility Reporting 2005,* Univeriteit van Amsterdam.

Laclau E. and Mouffe C. (1985), Hegemony and Socialist Strategy, Verso, London, UK.

Larrinaga-Gonzales C. and Bebbigton J. (2001), Accounting change or institutional appropriation?—A case study of the implementation of environmental accounting, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* Vol. 12 [269-292].

Larrinaga-Gonzalez C., Carrasco-Fenech F., Caro-Gonzalez J., Correa-Ruiz C. and Paez-Sandubete M. (2001), The role of environmental accounting in organizational change: an exploration of Spanish companies, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 14, No.2 [213-239].

Larrinaga-Gonzalez C. (2007), Sustainability Reporting: insights from the neo-institutional theory, in J. Unerman, J. Bebbington and B. O'Dwyer (eds.), *Sustainability Accounting and Accountability*, Routledge, London, UK [151-167].

Laughlin R. (1991), Environmental disturbances and organizational transitions and transformations: some alternative models, *Organization studies*, Vol.12, No. 2 [209-232].

Lewin K. (1947), Frontiers in group dynamics, in D. Catwright (eds.), *Field Theory in Social Science,* Social Science Paperbacks, London, UK.

Lindblom C.K. (1993), The implications of organizational legitimacy for corporate social performance and disclosure, *Paper presented at the Critical Perspectives on Accounting Conference*, New York, NY.

Llewellyn S. (1994), Managing the Boundary: How accounting is implicated in maintaining the organization, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 4 [4-23].

Lowndes V. (1996), Varieties of new institutionalism: a critical appraisal, *Public Administration,* Vol. 74, Summer [181-197].

Mathews M. (1997), Twenty five years of social and environmental accounting research: is there a silver jubilee to celebrate?, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 4 [481-531].

O'Dwyer B. (2002), Managerial perceptions of corporate social disclosure: an Irish story, *Accounting Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 3 [406-436].

Oliver C. (1992), The antecedents of deinstitutionalization, *Organization studies*, Vol.13, No. 4 [563-588].

Onida F. (2004), *Se il piccolo non cresce. Piccole e medie imprese italiane in affanno*, Il Mulino, Bologna, Italy.

Parker L. D. (2005), Social and environmental accountability research: A view from the commentary box, *Accounting Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 6 [842-860].

Rusconi G. (2006), *Il Bilancio Sociale, Economia, Etica e responsabilità sociale d'impresa*, Ediesse, Roma, Italy.

Quattrone P. (2004), Commenting on a commentary? Making methodological choices in accounting, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 15 [232-247].

Scott W. (1995), *Institutions and Organizations,* Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Spence C. (2007), Social and environmental reporting and hegemonic discourse, *Accounting Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 6 [855-882].

Thomson I. (2007), Mapping Sustainability Accounting, in J. Unerman, J. Bebbington and B. O'Dwyer (eds.), *Sustainability Accounting and Accountability*, Routledge, London, UK [307-327].

Wheeler D. and Elkington J. (2001), The end of the corporate environmental report? Or the advent of cybernetic sustainability reporting and communication?, *Business, Strategy and the Environment,* vol. 10, No 1 [1-14].