Domain Theory and Method Theory in Management Accounting Research: Theorizing a Moving Empirical Field

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Abstract
The major aim of this paper is to examine the roles of, and relationships between, domain theory and method theory in management accounting research. After introducing and defining the two concepts and arguing for the usefulness of this distinction for researchers, we apply them in the analysis of one particular method theory, Actor-Network Theory (ANT), as an example of how specific method theories can be and actually are mobilised in management accounting research. The subsequent analysis deals with the role that the method theory has been awarded in studies as well as the relationship between domain theory and method theory, including the location of the studies’ theoretical ambition. The analysis reveals that there can be numerous different types of relationships between domain theory and method theory and that the theoretical ambition does not always focus on domain theory. Both domain theories and method theories tend to be moving fields and their interaction can add to this feature. In the case of management accounting, various method theories, including ANT, have shaped our understanding of the domain field over time. Our analysis contributes to the on-going debates on the value and effects of using method theories, or theoretical lenses, in management accounting research.

Keywords: domain theory, method theory, actor-network theory, management accounting
1. Introduction

Chair in research seminar: Thanks for your presentation, Lee. It was interesting to learn how your case company went about developing their performance measurement system. Now, does anybody have any questions or comments about the presentation?

Colleague #1: I have a question about the theory part. Didn’t you say that the theory you are using here is Actor-Network Theory?

Presenter: Yes, that’s right.

Colleague #1: Okay then, could you tell us how your research actually contributes to ANT? I didn’t get that from your presentation.

Presenter: Well, ummm….ANT is a popular theory for studying how innovations are constructed, and I’m trying to show how different interests affected how the system eventually turned out… I’m not sure if this answers your question...

Colleague #1: Actually, what I meant was, what new things did you learn about ANT in this study?

Colleague #2: Is the aim in this research really to develop ANT? Aren’t you trying to contribute to the theory on performance measurement?²

The roles of various theories in research are a steady source of inspiration to scholars of accounting. New or refined frameworks for characterizing a study’s theory contributions have been presented, such as Keating’s (1995) taxonomy, which categorises studies according to whether their purpose is to discover, illustrate, specify or refute theory. But is the notion of theory as such sufficient to cover all relevant aspects? When we consider, for instance, management accounting studies, they actually often seem to relate to two types of theories, domain theory and method theory – the distinction introduced in passing by Lukka (2005). Domain theory refers to the body of knowledge concerning a certain substantive field, while method theory may be defined as a meta-level conceptual system for studying the substantive issue(s) at hand. While the application of method theories, or “theoretical lenses” (e.g. Modell, 2005; Cuganesan & Lee, 2006; Baxter & Chua, 2008; Emsley, 2008; Gurd, 2008), is not a novel phenomenon in management accounting research, their role in developing theoretical knowledge is sometimes unclear (Humphrey & Scapens, 1996; Vaivio, 2008; Malmi & Granlund, 2009). Therefore it seems that the distinction between domain theory and method theory and the application of method theories in management accounting research deserve more attention than they have thus far been awarded.

Increased awareness of the distinction, and the various kinds of relationships, between domain theory and method theory can be of great help to our academic community. Through profound consideration of these issues, researchers are likely to become more conscious of the kinds of theoretical ambitions and targets of contribution a certain piece of research includes or can include. This should be useful in terms of helping researchers to systematically design their own work and evaluate that of others. It could be argued to also save researchers’ resources in the sense of enabling them to clearly articulate their ambitions and contributions and thus, for instance, decreasing journal submissions of papers with confused theoretical agendas. This line of thinking could be introduced to doctoral students at the very beginning of their research careers in order to diminish confusion and guide the development of their theoretical thinking. Finally, an increased understanding of how a domain field develops as a result of interacting with method theories may perhaps alleviate concerns regarding the value of mobilizing them.

Our aim in this paper is to analyse and discuss the roles and relations of domain theory and method theory in management accounting research, which we believe need further considerable clarification. We attempt to accomplish this aim both by analytical reasoning and by a thorough exploration of published management accounting studies applying method theory. We will particularly seek to find answers to the following questions: Are these two types of theories explicitly distinguished in management accounting

² We thank Latour (2005) for inspiring this dialogue.
studies? Can that be done in an unambiguous way? Where do the ambitions for theoretical contribution lie in management accounting studies using method theories? How does the interaction between domain theory and method theory shape our understanding of the domain field over time?

We will particularly consider these issues in the case of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) as one example of how method theories are mobilized in accounting studies. Our choice to examine particularly ANT stems from the observations that while it is a popular and esteemed theoretical lens in management accounting research, at the same time researchers utilizing it do not always seem to recognize the domain theory/method theory distinction and its implications. There are for instance some ANT-based studies which seem to lack any ambition as regards producing a contribution to domain theory. Are these papers then targeted to contributing to the method theory, in this case ANT? Or do these articles yet contain a domain theory element, which has just not been explicated?

Our exploration takes place with the help of an in-depth analysis of prior management accounting research literature based on ANT. Although our paper has certain tangential points with that of Justesen & Mouritsen (2011), our aim is not to review ANT-inspired management accounting research as such but to shed light on our questions on the roles of, and relations between, domain theory and method theory as well as to illustrate our theoretical arguments with examples from those studies. The starting point for our analysis is a study’s research question, which in the typical case is expected to be clearly motivated and based on the problematisation of one or more aspects of a specified management accounting domain theory. We then consider the explication of the domain theory as well as the article’s justification for the choice of the method theory. Finally, we analyse the role assigned to the method theory in each study. Our analysis reveals five different types of relationship, the most prevalent of which is an instrumental use of method theory in order to produce a contribution to domain theory.

We will also pay attention to the long-term effects of the interaction between domain theory and method theory, again focusing on the example of management accounting and ANT. Our analysis indicates that both domain theories and method theories tend to be moving fields and that their interaction can add to this feature. Yet, these effects seem to be asymmetrical in the sense that in this interaction domain theory tends to change more than method theory. In the case of management accounting, various method theories, including ANT, have shaped our understanding of the domain field over time, and thereby management accounting has gradually become what it was not (Hopwood, 1983). The particular contribution of ANT in this sense is to have opened the eyes of scholars to a world full of possibilities, where actors come in various forms and stability is always at risk of being there only momentarily. ANT has shifted the boundaries of management accounting to the extent that some of its concepts have become part of the standard vocabulary. For instance, ANT-based relationist explanations of management accounting change are nowadays included in several business school textbooks.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. The second section defines and explains the concepts of domain theory and method theory, especially in the context of management accounting research, and develops our conceptual framework. The third section applies the framework to study the recognition and implications of the domain theory/method theory distinction in published management accounting articles utilizing ANT as their method theory. The fourth section discusses the overall findings of the research as well as the nature of accounting as a domain theory platform, the nature of ANT as a method theory, and the dynamic relationship between the two. The closing section presents our conclusions.

2. Domain theory and method theory

2.1 Prior literature

Recent developments in assessing accounting studies from the theoretical point of view are combined in Lukka’s (2005) six-item taxonomy of management accounting case studies, founded upon two dimensions,
the researcher’s empirical intervention and the theory linkage of the study. The theory dimension is a modification of Keating’s (1995) framework and categorises articles depending on whether they aim to discover, illustrate, refine or test theory. Despite such advances, we argue that the notion of theory as such is not specific enough to describe the variety of theoretical frameworks mobilized in research. This is particularly the case in the field of management accounting where a debate on the essence of “theory” has persisted for years (see Zimmerman, 2001; Hopwood, 2002; Ittner & Larcker, 2002; Luft & Shields, 2002, Lukka & Mouritsen, 2002, Vaivio, 2008; Malmi & Granlund, 2009a). The debate was inflamed by Zimmerman’s (2001) provocative remarks regarding the lack of theory development in management accounting research. His starting point was Ittner & Larcker’s (2001) wide review of empirical management accounting research, in which they noted that most of the research had not proceeded beyond descriptions of accounting practice to the development or testing of theories, thus resulting in an underdeveloped body of knowledge. Zimmerman’s interpretation of the foundation of such theories became evident when he stated that “no unifying, economics-based theory has developed to guide empirical managerial accounting research” (p. 417). Consequently, he recommended management accounting researchers to adopt economics as an underlying discipline in order to better succeed in theory building.

In the discussion that ensued, Hopwood (2002) pointed out that while economics was useful for the investigation of certain types of accounting topics, sociological and organizational modes of explanation were likely to be of more help in investigating social and cultural aspects related to the dynamics of calculative systems. Ittner & Larcker (2002) defended the use of non-economics based theories with a parallel example from finance research, where the explanatory power of behavioural explanations has been more or less accepted since the mid-1990s. Luft and Shields (2002) as well as Lukka & Mouritsen (2002) in turn applauded the diversity of views and research topics opened up by management accounting researchers’ use of frameworks drawn from other social sciences besides economics. It is noteworthy that these responses to Zimmerman did not explicitly mention the existence of an independent “management accounting theory” but rather focused on discussing the non-accounting fields from which suitable theories could be drawn. The idea that there could exist management accounting theories seems to have become increasingly used in literature since the mid-2000s, with examples provided in the form of, for instance, management control theory (Ahrens & Chapman, 2006), theory on senior managers’ use of monitoring systems (Vaivio, 2008) as well as cost accounting theory (Malmi & Granlund, 2009a). The main point of the above debate and discussion from our perspective is that uncertainty still prevails as to what exactly counts as a theory in management accounting. One way to clarify the situation is to characterize theories based on the roles that they have in a particular piece of research. Lukka (2005) for instance distinguishes between two types of theories, domain theory and method theory. Domain theory may be defined as the accumulated knowledge on a substantive topic area of a domain such as accounting2, while method theory refers to a meta-level conceptual system, or theoretical lens, which originates from another field such as organization studies or sociology. A method theory offers a vocabulary and syntax, often also substantive propositions, which are, at least with adaptations, transferable to another disciplinary domain. The typical point of using a method theory is to offer a different perspective and form a lever for gaining new insights, which can be more specific but also lead to more abstract or general conclusions.

What are perceived to have the role of method theories in one field are normally in the role of domain theories in other fields. Economics, for instance, is a very strong and sovereign discipline as such, but it also offers broad method theories for much of accounting research. The same can be said, though on a smaller scale, about psychology and sociology. Foucault’s theory about power and knowledge, for instance, is a distinct domain theory within the discipline of sociology, but it is also widely used as a method theory in a

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2 We are not attempting to promote a view of accounting as a fixed category but rather view it as “a practice and discipline of study without an agreed and widely understood subject matter” (Hopwood, 1985, p. 361).
number of other fields, such as accounting. Hence the role of a theory can vary in different instances and applying a certain theory as a method theory is one of the possible roles it can have.

Method theories can function in different ways. Broad method theories are widely and thoroughly integrated with another discipline up to the point that they can shake the sovereignty of the target field. The relationship between the theories of economics as method theories and those of accounting as domain theories exemplifies this. The use of method theories based on economics is a very strong paradigm in management accounting research (e.g. Lukka, 2010) and thus for many researchers, accounting-related issues only offer research questions to be explored utilizing theories from economics, and thereby the distinction between the two domains becomes indistinct. But there are also far more narrowly used method theories, which are applied in specified sub-domains and research questions of the domain theory. Sociological and psychological theories exemplify this option in the case of accounting. In the case of these more narrowly used method theories, the distinction between method theory and domain theory is typically more clear-cut than in the case of the more broadly used ones – as soon as the researcher has become conscious about the possibility, and even need, of this distinction. However, as will be elaborated later, the interaction between domain theory and method theory can change at least the domain field over time.

A researcher’s decision to apply a method theory in the first place is most likely affected by both functional and institutional factors (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983); that is, not only because theories have value-in-use but also because their application has become institutionalized. In the field of management accounting, the functional use of sociological method theories may be claimed to stem from the observation that the concepts and domain theories of accounting or method theories from economics do not provide sufficient explanations for phenomena involving humans, technical artefacts or information systems. This perception is behind a broader call for interdisciplinary research: knowledge cannot be neatly categorized according to discipline. Method theories are, for instance, often mobilized in management accounting studies with the agenda of analyzing the value and interest structures behind human action. In this context, method theories may be further divided into theories in and of accounting (Hopwood, 1978; 1985) based on whether they advance behavioural or socio-psychological explanations of individuals’ use of accounting techniques or whether they are aimed at understanding accounting in its social and organizational context (Hopwood, 1983; Dent, 1991) or engendering social emancipation (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Cooper & Hopper, 1989). There is a rather wide array of management accounting studies which have been informed by social theories such as Giddens’s structuration theory (Roberts & Scapens, 1985; Macintosh & Scapens, 1990; Granlund, 2001; Conrad, 2005), Foucault’s notion of governmentality and archeology (Preston, 1992; Miller & O’Leary, 1994; Cowton & Dopson, 2002), Bourdieu’s practice theory (Baxter & Chua, 2008) as well as Actor-Network Theory (Chua, 1995; Mouritsen, Larsen & Buhk, 2001; Hyvönen, Järvinen & Pellinen, 2008; for a complete list see section 3.2). The application of method theories such as these has arguably shaped how we think of management accounting – an issue that we will consider in more detail below.

Despite the prevalence of method theories in management accounting research, their use has also been considered problematic. Recent literature (e.g. Humphrey & Scapens, 1996; Vaivio, 2008; Malmi & Granlund, 2009a, Richardson, 2012) touches upon the troublesome nature of method theories while addressing the broader issues of management accounting research and theory development. The major concern expressed in those studies is that theories imported from other fields are not unique to management accounting but are of such a general nature that they can just as well be used to explain various other social phenomena. This causes ambiguity in terms of whether or not these studies actually contribute anything to accounting knowledge (Humphrey & Scapens, 1996). A related issue is scholars’ tendency to continue illustrating the compatibility of an already established method theory with accounting theory without making a contribution to either of them, a phenomenon that Vaivio (2008: 77) aptly calls the “it fits, it fits!” problem of accounting research. Both Humphrey & Scapens (1996) and Vaivio (2008) consider it unfortunate that only few efforts have been made to challenge method theories or modify them to better suit the accounting context. In the same vein, Richardson (2012) regrets that
scholars have not attempted to contribute back to the original theories from which they draw their insights but are merely consumers of those theories. A further concern associated with the use of method theories is that sometimes the pre-adopted theoretical framework even overshadows the accounting phenomenon of interest, which may lower the status of the particular study, and management accounting research in general, in the eyes of mainstream academics or practitioners (Malmi & Granlund, 2009a). One explanation for the allegedly inappropriate use of method theories is offered by Malmi & Granlund (2009a), who suggest that domain theories in management accounting have not yet been granted theory status and thus an author wishing to be credited for theorizing might feel compelled to apply a theoretical lens, no matter how redundant this would be in terms of her research findings.

Although the application of method theories is accepted as a possibility in accounting research, we feel that there is still considerable uncertainty – if not even confusion – regarding their role in the entire storyline of studies. On the one hand, there are likely to be studies which utilize method theories without making any kind of theoretical contribution. On the other hand, critics such as Humphrey & Scapens (1996) and Vaivio (2008) seem not to have considered the possibility that the interaction between domain theory and method theory may change researchers’ conception of domain theory over time even if the method theory were not modified or challenged by the researchers applying it. Therefore we feel that the application of domain theory and method theory in published research merits more attention than it has thus far been awarded. To this end, we will develop and apply a conceptual framework to analyze the roles and interrelationship of domain theory and method theory.

2.2 Conceptual framework

Figure 1 depicts our conceptual framework for analysing the roles and relationships that domain theory and method theory may have in studies. The framework is derived from the discussions and debates in extant literature, reviewed in the previous section, regarding the ways in which method theories are applied and whether or not studies utilizing method theories actually contribute to the field of management accounting. Thus, domain theory is examined from the point of view of whether or not it is clearly the target of a study’s theoretical ambitions, manifest in the form of well-motivated research questions situated in the domain of accounting. Method theory in turn is investigated from the perspective of the role that it has in a particular study. Three roles are considered possible in this context: using the method theory for the first few times to illustrate its feasibility for the study of domain theory phenomena; utilizing the method theory when it is no longer a novelty in the domain field but without making modifications to it; and refining the method theory to better suit the examination of a certain domain theory problem. Finally, the lines in the middle of the figure illustrate the relationships that domain theory and method theory may have in studies.

Based on concerns expressed in extant literature, our a priori assumption is that there are at least some studies in which domain theory ambition is unclear and the method theory utilized is already established; in other words, the novelty value of the studies would be doubtful. Regarding the five other combinations, we do not hypothesize about their prevalence but consider each to be possible. Further below we will apply
our analytical framework to identify the roles of and relationships between domain theory and method theory in published management accounting studies utilizing ANT as their method theory.

As research in a particular field evolves, it is natural that some method theories are discarded after a few attempts, while others continue to thrive and become part of standard repertoire. Ultimately, certain concepts from method theories which occupy such an established position may become embedded within domain theory vocabulary to such an extent that they are no longer accompanied by a reference to the original source. This indicates that interaction with the method theory may expand the boundaries of the domain theory and simultaneously shape our understanding of the latter. That such a phenomenon may take place is illustrated in the second part of our analysis, again utilizing management accounting and Actor-Network Theory as examples.

3. The relationship between domain theory and method theory in the case of ANT

3.1 ANT as a research approach

Actor-Network Theory is a research approach developed since the late 1970s, most prominently by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, but also to some extent by John Law and others, in the field of science and technology studies. The theory was first introduced to management accounting researchers through the pioneering work of Miller (1991), Robson (1992), Preston, Cooper & Coombs (1992) and Chua (1995). As the use of ANT as a method theory in management accounting has proliferated, researchers have increasingly opted to draw ideas from the writings of Latour (1987, 2005), while Callon has remained the inspirational source of a considerably smaller circle of scholars (e.g. Christensen & Skaerbaek, 2007; Skaerbaek & Tryggestad, 2010). A possible reason for such a skewed distribution might be that while Latour is a productive author in several empirical fields, Callon’s work is more focused on economics and the workings of financial markets. However, since the theoretical ideas of the two authors remain to a great extent consistent, our analysis of ANT as a method theory in management accounting encompasses works citing either of them.

The fundamental premises of ANT may be expressed in terms of four key notions: actors, translation, alliances and trials of strength. An actor is defined as any human or non-human thing which has an effect on another thing (Latour, 2005, p. 71). This means that for instance software, political ideologies and numerical inscriptions are all considered equally concrete agencies and as real in an ontological sense as human beings (Harman, 2009). Awarding non-human objects with agency is a much debated but, according to Latour (2005, 76), also a gravely misunderstood issue:

“ANT is not, I repeat is not, the establishment of some absurd ‘symmetry between humans and non-humans’. To be symmetric, for us, simply means not to impose a priori some spurious asymmetry among human intentional action and a material world of causal relations.”

Thus, ANT does not claim that non-human actors hold the power of determination but rather that the form assumed by an agency is not relevant as long as it makes some kind of difference in the surrounding world. By taking such a stance ANT effectively straddles the age-old gap between nature and society, or conscious human subjects and mindless non-human objects. Yet, it does not follow from this position that the world according to ANT would be filled with simple causal relationships; on the contrary, work needs to be done to trace and illustrate the translations and trials of strength which take place on the way as a truth, or a black box, is formed. The term translation itself eludes precise definitions and differs to some extent by author. Callon (1986) for instance portrays translation as a process where one group of actors, using a variety of tactics, acquires the power to speak on others’ behalf, while in his later work Latour (2005, 8) offers the view that translation takes place when a new, traceable association between human and non-
human elements is produced. An illustrative analogy portrays translation taking place similarly as a bill goes through Congress: modified at each step by a number of actors, always uncertain of whether or not the bill will ultimately pass as an Act (Harman, 2009).

For the translation to succeed and a new black box to emerge, an actor needs to surround itself with a network of allies. The more connected an actor is, the more powerful and real it is. Consequently, social order, power, truth, or any other seemingly self-evident phenomenon should not be taken as starting points but viewed as the result of multifarious trials of strength between actors. Such trials constantly emerge when actors resist externally imposed definitions of their interests and objectives and refuse to become enrolled into a particular network. It then follows that disorder is the norm whereas the stability of systems is a laboriously achieved state which may collapse at any time. Constant maintenance is needed in order to keep a network from dissembling and established truths from being questioned. The processes of fabrication, or construction, are perceived to take place perpetually in the sense that each new element added to make the construction stronger may suddenly generate unexpected effects, sometimes resulting in attempts at regaining stability by adding yet more elements.

The overriding interest of ANT researchers lies in studying how black boxes emerge out of the dynamics associated with a constellation of actors becoming at least momentarily interconnected and their goals aligned. However, to study such events, which typically involve both human and non-human entities, is challenging since the latter rapidly transform from mediators, which translate the message they are conveying, back into voiceless intermediaries, which are mere transporters of messages. Therefore ANT is considered particularly suitable for the study of innovations (Latour, 2005) since in these situations the number of mediators is large and they have not yet become silent. Innovations are also a fruitful target of analysis since they are associated with the emergence of new technologies and the formation of new groups of actors; dynamics which are bound to generate traceable associations.

When considering the nature of ANT as a method theory, as opposed to a sociological domain theory, we may characterize it as a very open research approach, which offers a vocabulary as well as certain rules of method and principles (Latour, 1987) for researchers wishing to explore processes of construction in a particular domain. Although these principles may not be considered bona fide propositions, it seems justified to posit that ANT still provides one type of a priori lens through which the world may be viewed. Herein lays a certain internal paradox since Latour himself shuns the idea of a researcher imposing pre-determined theoretical frameworks or categories upon the subjects to be examined:

"Your task is no longer to impose some order, to limit the range of acceptable entities, to teach actors what they are, or to add some reflexivity to blind practices." (Latour, 2005, p. 12)

According to this view, instead of imposing pre-established notions on their subjects, researchers should “just describe” (ibid., p. 144) how the actors themselves define and order the social whilst deployed in a range of controversies. This paradox is a rather unique feature of ANT in comparison to other method theories, which usually contain less explicit instructions for researchers applying them. Yet, in practice this anomaly has not hindered the adoption of ANT as a method theory in various domains, including organization studies and accounting.

In the field of management accounting, the major feat of ANT has been to restore the role of numbers and calculations as the focal point of sociologically rooted investigations of accounting phenomena (Mouritsen & Justesen, 2011). Especially Robson’s (1992) seminal work on the application of the concepts of inscriptions and action at a distance has spawned numerous studies on how reports and tables containing accounting figures may be utilized by organizational centres to impose their will on those from which they added to make the construction stronger may suddenly generate unexpected effects, sometimes resulting in attempts at regaining stability by adding yet more elements.

3 This advice appears to be in some contradiction with the widely established view in the philosophy of science according to which all our observations are theory laden (e.g. Hanson, 1958; Popper, 1959).
are separated by a temporal or spatial distance, without resorting to direct intervention. Another branch of ANT-inspired management accounting research has investigated processes related to the fabrication or implementation of various innovations such as Activity-Based Costing (e.g. Briers & Chua, 2001; Jones & Dugdale, 2002), the Balanced Scorecard (Qu & Cooper, 2011) or ERP systems (Hyvönen et al., 2008). Our method for analysing the role of ANT as a method theory in relation to the accounting domain in such studies is presented in the next section.

3.2 The data and method of analysis

For the purpose of examining the interrelationships between domain theory and method theory in accounting research, we analysed articles published in highly recognized accounting journals. At this point it must be noted that focusing on published works only carries certain limitations in terms of studying the theoretical ambitions and contributions of a particular piece of research. Such an approach is likely to leave out several studies which have never reached publication stage because they have been deemed less successful by peers in research seminars or conferences or in journal review processes. However, the collection of such material would have been complicated since it would have required following the trajectory of particular working papers for several years and establishing whether or not their ultimate rejection was indeed due to poor application of ANT or perhaps another issue such as inadequate empirics. Therefore it was considered reasonable to limit the sample to journal articles, more particularly those published during 1991-2010 in the following seven journals (in alphabetical order): Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal (AAAJ); Accounting, Organizations and Society (AOS); Contemporary Accounting Research (CAR); Critical Perspectives on Accounting (CPA); European Accounting Review (EAR); Journal of Management Accounting Research (JMAR); and Management Accounting Research (MAR). The journal sample consisted of high-quality journals which were considered likely to publish sociologically oriented management accounting research, such as studies based on ANT. The articles for the analysis were chosen based on two criteria: first, that they utilise ANT as a method theory to a significant extent, and second, that they belong to the field of management accounting research. By “significant extent” we mean studies which make use of ANT more broadly than just by referring to one or two concepts. Articles were located from scholarly databases with the search terms “Latour”, “Callon”, “Actor-Network Theory”, “ANT”, and “sociology of translation”.

Applying the above criteria, 33 articles were found and subjected to analysis (AAAJ – 4; AOS – 15; CAR – 1; CPA – 3; EAR – 2; MAR – 8; JMAR – 0). The distribution of the examined articles’ publication years suggests that ANT research in management accounting begun in the early 1990s with approximately one published article per year until the mid-2000s. Since 2005, the application of ANT has remained relatively stable with on average three articles being published annually.

In the first part of our analysis we applied our conceptual framework to investigate the relationship between domain theory and method in the articles. For this purpose, each article was read through with the aim of establishing, first of all, whether or not it had any clear ambitions regarding the accounting domain that would be manifest in the form of a clearly motivated research question, and, to a lesser extent, whether or not its results clearly contributed to domain theory. We also examined the role of the method theory (here ANT) in relation to the domain theory ambition in the articles. In the second part of the analysis, we examined the effects of long-term interaction between domain theory and method theory. In particular, we investigated whether or not the interplay between ANT and management accounting has resulted in certain ANT concepts becoming part of standard vocabulary in management accounting research. The concepts chosen for illustrative purposes are action at a distance and fabrication because there is very little ambiguity regarding their origin, in contrast to for instance the concept of translation

4 To provide an example of what such a criterion meant in practice, we excluded for instance the article by Preston, Chua and Neu (1997) which utilizes Foucault’s theory of governmentality as the main analytical framework but mentions each of the ANT terms “translation” and “black box” once.
which may also be utilized in studies with reference to the common meaning of the word. The findings from our analysis will be elaborated in the following two sections.

3.3 The role of ANT in accounting research

First-time illustration of method theory

If we think about the mobilization of a method theory such as ANT in a field where it has not been used before, a logical justification for its use for the first couple of times is to illustrate and convince other scholars that its application as a theoretical lens will offer useful insights to certain types of domain theory problems. This combination forms the first type of relationship between domain theory and method theory that we identified in the analysed articles, and it is exemplified in our sample by Miller’s (1991) study of the emergence and promotion of Discounted Cash Flow (DCF) techniques in the 1960s’ UK. The broader theme of interest to Miller is the emergence of management accounting innovations, which had until then been explained mostly as practitioner-initiated solutions to real-life organizational problems. An influential piece of work promoting this view had been written by Johnson & Kaplan (1987) and it is particularly their theory that Miller sets out to challenge and refine through his example of DCF. In contrast to being practitioner-initiated, DCF techniques resulted from the theoretical musings of business school academics, albeit supported by parallel development work in the oil industry. While Johnson & Kaplan (1987) considered the emergence of DCF as an exception to their otherwise flawless model of accounting innovation, Miller brings to our attention several problematic issues associated with such a view, such as the influence on innovation of forces and agencies beyond the enterprise. He then points out that although all these aspects had to some extent been discussed in prior literature, no coherent theory or model encompassed all of them. The motivation for his study is therefore to provide more information on the processes of accounting innovation at both micro and macro levels of society as well as to add to the theoretical toolbox with which to address such issues. More particularly, his research focuses on how accounting innovations are influenced by different agencies, how the interrelations between these agencies are formed and the ways in which some innovations become associated with certain roles.

Miller then develops a framework based on the concepts of problematisation, programmes, translation and action at a distance. He argues that these concepts are significant because they focus on the various interlinkages and relays between different agencies and forces, which had until then been neglected in the investigation of accounting innovations. He is careful to point out that the ANT concepts are not meant to serve as a formal model:

“The concern here is not with Theory...in a new guise, but with suggesting particular ways of posing questions about accounting innovation.” (p. 758)

With the help of his conceptual framework, Miller traces the success of DCF in the UK to the interlinked interests of academics striving for relevance, practitioners attempting to solve practical problems, and the UK central government’s programme seeking for a solution to its macroeconomic concerns. Through this case exposition Miller refines the theory of accounting innovation beyond single-agency explanations and at the same time illustrates the usefulness of ANT for the study of calculative technologies. It is therefore a beautiful example of an article with a clear domain theory ambition in which the application of a method theory produces a significant contribution at the domain theory level and at the same illustrates the suitability of the method theory to the investigation of certain themes. Other examples of first-time illustration of ANT in the context of a clearly articulated accounting domain theory ambition include Robson (1992), Preston et al. (1992) and Chua (1995).

The second type of domain theory-method theory relationship that we identified also relates to the early stages of introducing ANT to management accounting research. At that point in time it was rather understandable that the main driving force for some researchers is the illustration of the method theory’s
feasibility, without specified research questions, by telling an empirically interesting story. Lawrence, Alam & Lowe (1994) for instance investigate the financial management reform in New Zealand, motivated by their rather broadly expressed interest in the “context for change and the construction of new technologies” (p. 70). Other than that, there is no clearly articulated research question or domain theory problematisation. Neither can the paper be said to express an explicit justification for the use of ANT nor develop a specific ANT-based conceptual or analytical framework. According to the authors, such vagueness is intentional as it helps them avoid any imposition of their own values on the readers, which is a rather peculiar claim considering the critical undercurrent of the work as discussed further below.

The events narrated in Lawrence et al. take place on both macro and micro levels of society, starting from an extensive description of the health care reform implemented by the New Zealand government as a part of the wider political movement towards the commercialization of public services. The paper then descends to the micro level to consider, relatively briefly, the construction of new accounting systems in the Waikato Area Health Board before returning to describe society-level concerns regarding the commodification of health care. In the concluding sections, the authors explain what they did in terms of ANT – followed the actors, traced various networks and observed the struggles involved in system construction – rather than how this increases overall understanding of accounting change. However, even though the paper seems to lack a clear domain theory ambition, it can be argued that it is by no means void of motivation. The delicate wording throughout the paper seems to be covering a critical agenda; the authors’ sympathies may be said to lie with those who fear for the consequences of imposing profit-orientation and other commercial values in the public sector:

“Ultimately, the accounting which is enacted is a reflection of who we are, who we want to be, what kind of a society we wish to realize.” (p. 93)

This notion finds further evidence in the discussion by Lawrence et al. of the empirical similarities between theirs and other ANT-inspired studies on health care reforms which point to implementation difficulties (Preston et al., 1992) or express outright criticism (Chua, 1995). It could therefore be posited that the implicit justification of Lawrence et al. for using ANT is that it provides a legitimate outlet for the researchers’ concerns for public well-being, even though this interpretation clashes with their explicit claim to avoid imposition of personal values. We therefore hold the paper by Lawrence et al. as a fine example of an unclear domain theory ambition combined with the purpose of illustrating the usefulness of the method theory for critical studies of accounting in action.

**Use of established method theory**

The third category of domain theory-method theory relations is prevalent in articles written after a method theory has become established, when researchers have no longer felt compelled to demonstrate its applicability but simply used it as a lens through which to explore domain theory phenomena. This research category turned out the most populous in our analysis and is exhibited for instance in Mouritsen (1999), Mouritsen, Larsen & Bukh (2001), McNamara, Baxter & Chua (2004), Quattrone & Hopper (2005), Cuganesan & Lee (2006), Mouritsen & Thrane (2006), Lowe & Koh (2007), Hyvönen et al. (2008), Mouritsen, Hansen & Hansen (2009) as well as Arnaboldi & Azzone (2010). As a recent example, consider Arnaboldi & Azzone’s account of the introduction of performance measurement in the Italian university sector. They begin their domain theory development by reviewing extant literature, explaining how performance measurement in the public sector differs from the private sector context and is thus worth studying context-specifically. Arnaboldi & Azzone then point to gaps in understanding how performance measures are operationalized, specifically in terms of the heterogeneity of actions involved with different public sector and reform settings. Their research intends to increase understanding of such issues, and of public sector accounting change more generally, by studying how a group of Italian universities worked to implement a performance measurement system (PMS).
Arnaboldi & Azzone’s analysis is structured around the four stages of translation as described by Latour (1987), the focal point being three different groups of actors as identified by the researchers. The reason for applying ANT is not made explicit in the paper, one explanation for which could be the established nature of the method theory. Arnaboldi & Azzone then recount the story of the 11-year project to implement performance measures in a group of Italian universities. The paper offers two types of contributions to extant literature on performance measurement and accounting change in the public sector. First of all, the authors argue that controversies form the crux of PMS translation as those simultaneously maintain the various actors’ interests in the measurement and management of public services and pose a threat to the continuation of the implementation process. Their second contribution is to illustrate the heterogeneity of the ploys and strategies with which three groups of actors associated with the network, the roles that they assigned to the PMS, and the types of controversies they brought up. We therefore may characterise Arnaboldi & Azzone’s article as a well-structured example of a clear domain theory ambition which is addressed through the application of an established method theory, resulting in contributions to the domain theory.

The fourth type of domain theory-method theory relations identified in the analysed ANT articles is the combination in which the ambition regarding domain theory is less clear and ANT is used as an established lens. Take for instance Lowe’s (2000) article on the health care reform in New Zealand, examined from the perspective of a large hospital implementing case-mix accounting. While the ANT articles representing the first, third and fourth types of relationships make it clear that their intention is to find answers to a certain domain theory issue (e.g. what makes an accounting innovation successful) through the study of a particular phenomenon (e.g. the implementation of ABC in organizations), Lowe’s paper seems to be concerned only with the particular:

“The purpose of this paper is to provide an explanation and understanding of developments in casemix accounting and related information systems at a large regional hospital…” (p. 84)

or the overly general:

“The research is primarily concerned to elaborate on the social context of accounting systems implementation…” (p. 85).

While the paper is about accounting change and/or the role of accounting in organizational change, prior literature related to this domain theory is hardly reviewed and no specific research questions are developed. The motivation for the study is presented only at the end of the paper in terms of empirical, not theoretical, gaps in extant work studying accounting change in the health care sector, such as concentrating on a different organizational level. It seems that what the paper does is use the vocabulary of ANT to tell a story of the implementation of a new accounting system in an organization, a notion supported by the prominent featuring of the words “describe” and “description” throughout the article as well as the outright statement:

“This research seeks to describe the processes of change from the perspective of the ‘sociology of translation’…” (p. 95).

Lowe’s main justification for using ANT is that the principle of symmetric treatment allows the conceptualization of accounting systems as quasi-objects consisting of both humans and nonhumans such as software. The paper offers as a contribution the observation that these systems, through the cost and profit information they produced, played a significant role in getting the hospital staff to support the change. This insight, however, is not developed further, compared to previous findings, or taken to a more general level, so the article’s contribution to domain theory remains somewhat scant. Published almost a decade after the first ANT articles in accounting, Lowe’s paper exhibits a combination of an unclear domain theory ambition and an illustration of an established method theory. A similarly unclear domain theory
ambition can be detected in a rather brief account of the translation of management accounting in Italy (Pipan & Czarniawska, 2010). Our interpretation of the nature of these studies prompts the question about the ultimate rationale of this kind of research. Having said that, we need to emphasise that an unclear domain theory ambition does not automatically exclude the possibility of having a rationale in the paper; this might be for instance the illustration of a yet unestablished method theory (such as in Lawrence et al., 1994).

Refining method theory

A fifth type of relationship between domain theory and method theory could be identified in articles which contained ambitions regarding both of them. A pertinent example of this is the paper by Briers & Chua (2001), who explore how accounting change takes place and is put into effect. In terms of domain theory development, they suggest that in order to understand the simultaneous ubiquity and irregularity of accounting change that had increased since the early 1990s, one needs to investigate the preconditions and processes of change and how they result in success or failure. The motivation for their research is that while previous studies on the complexity of change had tended to focus on the interests of a few powerful groups or to emphasise the happenstance nature of change, they investigate the purposeful actions of a variety of heterogeneous actors and the role played by so called boundary objects. They state their justification for the use of ANT as the wish to offer less socially laden explanations of the successfulness of innovations than those suggested for instance by diffusion theories of innovation.

Briers & Chua’s ambition in terms of domain theory is therefore to refine the theory on accounting change and for this purpose they also refine ANT by complementing it with Star and Griesemer’s (1991) concept of boundary objects. This framework is then applied to the study of the implementation of ABC in the business unit of an Australian manufacturing company, Alroll. Briers & Chua’s analysis validates their use of ANT and brings to the fore three types of contributions to literature. First, they show that accounting change at Alroll was a result of not only top management commitment but of the exertions of a variety of local and cosmopolitan actants, actors and allies with varying degrees of power and willingness to participate in the process. Briers & Chua especially highlight the insights offered by the symmetrical treatment of humans and non-humans:

“Actants – both local and cosmopolitan, were clearly crucial at Alroll. And it is here that actor network theory is distinctive – by enabling us to focus on the role of technological, non-human actors in change processes. In our narrative, there was computer hardware and software that was no longer able to cope with the size of information databases and the complexity of the manipulations required...Apart from computerized actants, there were the giant hot mill and plate itself – neither liked the other...Were it not for the specific behaviours of these actants, the path to accounting change would have been quite different at Alroll.” (Briers & Chua, 2001: 264).

As a second contribution, Briers & Chua illustrate the usefulness of refining ANT to include the analysis of boundary objects. The significance of boundary objects, especially ideal and visionary ones, is that they create connections between different groups of actors and facilitate the comparison of pieces of information across space and time. Thirdly, in contrast to prior accounting studies but echoing Latour, Briers & Chua suggest that the survival of an accounting innovation cannot be credited to its inherent, superior properties but to the deliberate actions of various actants whose interests and beliefs are tied together by the innovation. These links are so strong that they make the innovation succeed even when difficulties such as data deficiencies and “soft numbers” (p. 267) are encountered. Correspondingly, failure occurs when actors do not perceive an innovation as an obligatory point of passage to achieving their goals, and therefore do not attempt to make the innovation succeed. Briers & Chua’s article is clearly ambitious

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5 Interestingly, this view is the complete opposite of an earlier opinion voiced by Chua (1995), in which she refuses to grant interests or agency to non-humans.
and successful in terms of refining and contributing to both domain theory and method theory. Another paper in the same vein is Andon, Baxter & Chua (2007), which complements ANT with Quattrone & Hopper’s (2001) idea of drift to conceptualise accounting change as relational drifting.

In addition to the types of research exemplified above, it is possible that the main ambition of a paper is the further development of an established method theory, although in our sample of articles we did not find any that could be placed in this category.

3.4 The long-term impact of ANT on theories of management accounting

As one of the method theories applied in management accounting, ANT has had a distinct effect on the way in which researchers think about and study the field. It has equipped scholars with a conceptual and methodological toolbox with which to analyse possible paths of development and how accounting becomes what is was not (Hopwood, 1983). This is because, first of all, from the ANT point of view everything is in principle possible a priori and there is no way of predicting how things unfold. Thus, researchers applying ANT are able to study a wide variety of ways in which management accounting systems and numbers are constructed. Secondly, ANT has introduced a definition of actors as any things which have an impact on the action of some other agents, regardless of whether they are human beings or not. This has broadened the scope of management accounting research to include the analysis of the integral role that calculations and other inscriptions may play in for instance enabling action at a distance. Finally, ANT has turned the research setting around in the sense that its focus is on investigating how constructions emerge out of momentarily aligned interests and how such constructions may collapse at any moment. This has enabled management accounting scholars to provide broader and more nuanced analyses of how various accounting innovations may succeed, and highlight the amount of effort that is needed to keep those innovations stabilized. That such ideas and notions have gradually become established parts of accounting thinking and knowledge is suggested by the way in which certain ANT concepts, such as action at a distance and fabrication, seem to have become part of the standard vocabulary of the field, and also by the inclusion of ANT into accounting textbooks.

The concept of action at a distance was first utilized in management accounting research by Miller\(^6\) (1991) when analysing the proliferation of the DCF method in the UK. His article illustrates how the calculative technology enabled action at a distance on two levels: first, by bridging the temporal gap between the present and the future so that individual organizations could assess the impact of their investment decisions second, and secondly, through the establishment of an economic norm which enabled government agencies to influence the investment decisions of both nationalized industries and private companies without directly intervening in their decision-making. While Miller analysed action at a distance alongside three other concepts, Robson (1992) focused his full attention on the power of inscriptions in the context of long-distance control. In his study on the emergence of accounting as a technology of quantification, Robson (1992) posits that the dominant position of accounting and other numerical forms of knowledge development is based specifically on inscriptions being mobile, stable and combinable; qualities which facilitate their use in acting at a distance.

The trailblazing articles by Miller and Robson have been followed by a number of others, which also contain references to Latour as the original source of the concepts (e.g. McNamara et al., 2004; Quattrone & Hopper, 2005; Lowe & Koh, 2007). However, as accounting research has evolved, studies on action at a distance have begun to emerge in which reference is no longer made to Latour but either to Miller, Robson or nobody at all. For instance, Vollmer’s (2007) article on the use of numbers in ordering social activity contains the following sentence:

\(^6\) Coincidentally, rather similar thoughts as in Latour (1987) were presented by Scapens & Roberts (1985).
“In sum, mobility, stability, and combinability of financial numbers generate opportunities for ‘action at a distance’ (Miller & Rose, 1990, pp. 9–11; Robson, 1992, pp. 690–691) which participants would otherwise not be able to access.” (p. 580).

Although earlier in the article Vollmer mentions Robson’s work as an example of accounting research building upon ANT, nothing in the text preceding the above sentence implies to a reader unacquainted with ANT that action at a distance could have been coined by someone else than Miller or Robson. Other examples of this phenomenon include articles by Neu and Graham (2006), Hooper & Kearins (2009) as well as Pitkänen and Lukka (2011),

In a slightly different vein, in their investigation of the implementation of an ERP system, Dechow and Mouritsen (2005) invoke the term when contrasting their findings with those of earlier research (p. 728):

“Our cases also help us to say that ERP systems change the meaning of organizational visibility. Often, the notion of visibility is the panoptic, centralised action form, something executed as ‘action at a distance’. But, with ERP another notion of visibility becomes possible.”

Even though at the beginning of the article the authors have professed their use of ANT as a research approach and outlined key concepts, action at a distance is not mentioned until towards the end of the article. Although the term is placed inside quotation marks, no reference to a particular author is made here or in the other places where it is utilized. This implies that the readership of the article is expected to be familiar with the term to such an extent that references or explanations are no longer needed; in other words, the term has become a black box. Furthermore, Dechow and Mouritsen (2005) allude that explanations based on action at a distance are in a sense the norm and their findings present an interesting deviation from, or even a challenge to, such conventional views. This illustrates how a method theory concept which was originally introduced to provide an alternative explanation to prevailing theoretical views has itself become part of domain theory doctrine.

Another ANT concept which has become part of management accounting vocabulary is fabrication. It was first analyzed by Preston et al. (1992) and Chua (1995) in the empirical context of introducing respectively budgeting and costing systems to the health care sectors of UK and Australia. With the purpose of observing accounting in the making, Preston et al. and Chua analyze proponents’ efforts to enroll other actors behind these innovations and conclude that success and failure are not determined by the innovations’ techno-economic characteristics but result from the collective fabrication efforts of a group of actors. They also illustrate the inevitable and perpetual work of refabrication that follows when unexpected consequences emerge and actors’ interests are no longer aligned.

Similarly as in the case of action at a distance, studies of fabrication initially cited Latour as their source but as time has passed, more and more references are made to the early article of Preston et al. (1992). Jones & Mellett (2007, 93) for instance motivate their longitudinal analysis of accounting change by explaining that:

“The creation of ‘accounting facts’ which emerge from the process of organizational change are an end result of a fabrication process rooted in political, social and economic condition (Preston et al., 1992, p. 566)”.

Jones & Mellett continue that tracing the genealogy of such conditions is a prerequisite for understanding how sometimes seemingly irrelevant actions may in retrospect turn out to be significant contributions to processes of change. Yet, despite the use of ANT ideas to justify the research, the method theory applied by Jones & Mellett is not ANT but the Social Forces Model, which is in a way contrary to the principles of ANT in that it associates accounting developments with particular institutional and organizational structures and forces. That the concept of fabrication is thus utilized in connection with a method theory other than ANT illustrates well how certain concepts seem to have begun to exist independently of ANT.
In addition to ANT concepts becoming embedded in management accounting vocabulary, ANT has also made its way to graduate-level textbooks. Macintosh & Quattrone (2010) and Wickramasinghe & Alawattage (2007) for example present it as a relationist perspective to understanding management accounting and control system change and controlling at a distance. Alongside other sociological method theories, ANT has thus changed our understanding of management accounting from the consideration of only technical and functional system characteristics to the study of the social and organizational contexts in which accounting operates.

In addition to ANT expanding the boundaries of management accounting knowledge as described above, it is also possible that ANT itself would change as a result of interacting with management accounting domain theory. However, in the articles that we analysed such an effect was distinctively exhibited in only a couple of instances (Briers & Chua, 2001; Andon et al., 2007). This suggests that, at least in published management accounting studies, the researchers’ theoretical ambitions and contributions are mostly targeted at domain theory.

4. Theorizing a moving empirical field

The domain theory – method theory distinction is founded upon the idea that theories may be conceived of in terms of the roles that they have in particular fields of research. A theory that is identified as a domain theory in one field may typically be transferred, at least with modifications, into other domains, in which its role transforms into that of a method theory. Depending on the extent to which a method theory is perceived to have colonised its host domain, it may be characterized as either a broad or a narrow one. Broad method theories may pervade their target fields so thoroughly that they undermine the independence of those fields, while narrow method theories are usually applied in a more precise fashion, for instance in the context of distinct sub-domains or research questions of the domain theory. These differences may sometimes result in an indistinct boundary between domain theory and method theory, such as in the case of economics and mainstream accounting research. In North America, for instance, there appears to be a tendency to represent disciplines like economics, psychology or sociology as options for theories that an accounting researcher can apply and simultaneously the theory of accounting is staged rather weakly and ambiguously: accounting is often merely a loose area of issues where the research question lies. Such staging of the relations between fields has not been apt to offer a strong basis for building a sovereign identity for accounting scholars and undermines the idea of accounting as a domain theory platform in itself.

While we subscribe to the relativist idea that drawing definite boundaries between scholarly fields is very difficult, and perhaps at times even dysfunctional, and recent academic debates clearly indicate that the nature of accounting theory is still a relatively open and debated issue (e.g. Malmi & Granlund, 2009a, 2009b; Quattrone, 2009), we do yet defend the idea that accounting can be viewed as a separate field and hence forms a domain theory platform. A strong pragmatist testimony for this is, for instance, the fact that there are numerous accounting research journals, which according to their editorial policies function based on the idea that there is the domain of accounting and hence, for instance, dismiss manuscripts, which are not viewed as dealing with accounting issues. This could hardly be an established condition if accounting did not possess sufficient characteristics of a sovereign scholarly domain, including a certain distinct conceptual system and vocabulary as well as a certain doctrine of established knowledge about the relations between the major themes and issues, with which these concepts deal.

Concerns expressed in extant literature point towards the need to clarify the roles and relations of domain theory and method theory in management accounting research. The analysis of the previous sections illustrates how domain theories and method theories are distinguished and utilized by researchers in practice. We investigated researchers’ motivations for mobilizing a specific method theory in their studies as well as illuminated how the method theory and domain theory relate to each other in terms of
theoretical ambitions and contributions. In a typical case, such ambitions and contributions were clearly targeted at a domain theory, while method theory played a more instrumental role in interpreting the findings. However, a few of the analysed studies also aimed at, and succeeded in, developing the method theory, and it may be claimed that in such instances the theoretical advances also contributed to the same theory in its domain theory role. For instance, there seems to be no logical reason to negate that Briers & Chua’s (2001) incorporation of ANT with the concept of boundary objects was a contribution to ANT as a sociological domain theory, in addition to offering novel insights into the study of accounting change.

While we are more than willing to accept that management accounting scholars have the option to try to contribute to the method theory they are applying, we are hesitant to go as far as Richardson (2012) does when he insists that (qualitative) management accounting scholars should do that. Hence we keep to the idea that the natural and primary main task of management accounting scholars is to contribute to their own domain and it is, in our view, completely acceptable for them to only utilise their chosen method theories. Yet, on our part we insist that management accounting scholars should be clearly aware of, and report explicitly about, the target of their theoretical contributions, be that domain theory or method theory or even both. As our literature analysis indicates, this is not always the case even in published works, even though these articles would have appeared in distinguished scientific journals. Furthermore, it must be kept in mind that papers with confused theoretical agendas appear often in conferences, workshops and research journals’ review processes, but seldom end up getting published. We believe that some of the time spent on re-writing rejected papers could be saved if researchers had a clear idea of the target of their contribution to start with.

Even though our main argument is that making the distinction between domain theory and method theory is helpful for researchers in order for them to better design their research, locate their theoretical ambitions and identify their contributions, we feel that a qualification regarding this distinction is in order. There is a challenge related to the intermingling of domain theory and method theory in terms of being able to tell where one stops and the other one starts; that is, the distinction is not an absolute one. An illustration of such interlacing is the article by McNamara et al. (2004), which states as its aim the critical study of how organisational knowledge is constructed and ends up concluding (p. 73):

“Consistent with actor-network theory, the construction of these organisational knowledges was inseparable from the processes underlying their constitution, and the specific knowledge networks giving rise to them...More particularly, this research...suggests a need to investigate the constellation of organisational knowledges and accounting’s place within it.”

The excerpt above is representative of the language utilised throughout the whole article of McNamara et al., which is imbued with ANT concepts and propositions, and thus it exemplifies the difficulty of expressing accounting theory ambitions or contributions by utilising accounting terminology only. From a purely theoretical point of view, such reporting of results may be considered laudable as it suggests that the researchers have a sound understanding of, and justification for, the application of their method theory framework. However, the inseparability of domain theory and method theory may result in practitioners finding the contributions of the research incomprehensible or, worse yet, irrelevant for their own work.

We also investigated the effects of the prolonged interplay of domain theory and method theory. As we have illustrated using the concepts of action at a distance and fabrication as examples, certain concepts originating from method theory may become such an established part of management accounting researchers’ vocabulary that they have become black-boxed, that is, they are sometimes used without reference to the original author or even considered to represent conventional explanations, which can and need to be challenged. Furthermore, established method theory concepts may be utilized in combination with other method theories and, more generally, irrespective of whether or not the particular method theory is explicitly mentioned in the same context. In our case, ANT concepts have started to live their own lives in management accounting literature independent of ANT. Furthermore, the results of ANT-inspired
research are currently featured in several management accounting textbooks. This illustrates how continued interaction with a method theory may shift the boundaries of a domain theory, even though the method theory were not specifically modified to the domain theory context.

Outside our main argument, there is an issue worthy of taking into consideration when analysing particularly ANT as an example of method theory usage in management accounting research. As discussed earlier, Latour (2005) abhors up front theoretical framing of actors and events since, according to him, such an approach will never fail in finding an explanation. Moreover, the need to accompany a description of events with a theoretical interpretation is considered as an indication of agencies being suppressed instead of being added to the description. On the other hand, not even ANT can escape the fact that every theory is bound to define the concepts which it applies, implying necessarily categorizations and boundaries. Moreover, the central ideas of ANT offer a model, albeit a loosely sketched one, about how facts, machines and power differentials come about. Therefore, despite Latour’s forewarnings, ANT should in any case be viewed as an a priori framework for exploring how the world is continuously being constructed and re-constructed. What is even more paradoxical in this context is that with its success as a method theory in various fields, ANT has illustrated the benefits accruing from the application of a priori frameworks.

5. Concluding comments

The nature and essence of different types of theories continue to kindle debate and discussion among scholars in various fields. The nature of theory is especially debated in management accounting where studies often relate to both domain theories dealing with substantive issues of accounting and conceptual method theories originating from other fields, representing one important form of conducting interdisciplinary research. Domain theory and method theory are context-bound concepts. Hence for instance ANT can be viewed as a domain theory in sociology, while in accounting studies it is cast in the role of method theory.

In this paper we argue for the usefulness of increasing management accounting researchers’ awareness of the distinction and relationships between domain theory and method theory. Its primary benefit is to help researchers make conscious choices regarding where to locate their theoretical ambition when designing their studies, adding to the clarity of their contributions. A similar way of thinking is useful, we argue, when studies are evaluated in various contexts, for example in journals’ review processes. Making this distinction visible at an early stage of training doctoral students should be helpful regarding the development of their understanding as to how management accounting research can be conducted and the results reported in a solid, lucid and productive manner. Method theories as such are not a novelty in management accounting research; yet their role in developing theoretical contributions to accounting knowledge has remained somewhat ambiguous. Thus we felt that the distinction between method theory and domain theory, as well as the way in which method theories are applied, required further clarification. Therefore the purpose of this paper was to study the roles and relationships between domain theory and method theory in published management accounting studies.

Our literature analysis, focusing on the example of how Actor-Network Theory has been used as a method theory in the domain of management accounting research, revealed five types of relationships between domain theory and method theory. The first of them was exhibited in articles which had been written with the intent of persuading other scholars of the applicability of ANT while at the same time containing both ambitions and contributions with regard to domain theory. The second type of relationship was also related to first-time illustration of ANT, but seemed to be motivated by societal rather than domain theory concerns. The third type of relationship prevailed in articles written after ANT had become established, in which it was mostly utilised as a lens through which to study domain theory issues and produce contributions. The fourth category contains the few pieces of research which could be said to exhibit ambitions regarding both domain theory and method theory. Finally, the fifth type of relationship between
domain theory and method theory comprises articles which utilised ANT without clear domain theory or method theory ambitions. In addition to these five types of relationships, it is possible that the main ambition of a paper is the further development of a method theory, although in our sample of ANT articles we did not find any that could be placed in this category.

Prior literature has at times harboured a rather suspicious attitude towards the use of method theories in (management) accounting research. It has been doubted that scholars utilizing method theories are not able to produce contributions to domain theories and that method theories are often used as somewhat ritualistic flagging of sophisticated theorizing. In the case of ANT, this claim does not seem to receive support since the absolute majority of the articles analysed in this paper did contain a well justified research question based on domain theory and were also able to add to the corresponding body of knowledge. Our results indicate that management accounting scholars have mostly an instrumental view of ANT, that is, it is simply used as a tool. However, in some cases we were not able to detect any theoretical or other ambitions, while ANT provided just the language with which to tell an empirical story. Although there were only a few such articles in our sample, they necessarily raised some concerns regarding the ultimate purpose of such research. One explanation may be that the authors of the articles have not really identified the role of ANT in their research and thus have not been able to decide where their theoretical ambitions should be placed.

Both domain theories and method theories tend to be moving fields and their interaction can add to this feature. Hence, their interaction can also generate long-term effects, especially in terms of expanding domain theory boundaries. In the case of management accounting, various method theories have shaped our understanding of the domain over time, and thereby management accounting has gradually become what it was not (Hopwood, 1983). Such effects were brought forth by our analysis, again focusing on the example of ANT. The particular contribution of ANT in this sense is to have opened the eyes of scholars to a world full of possibilities, where actors come in various forms and stability is always at risk of being there only momentarily. ANT has also shifted the borderlines of management accounting to the extent that some of its concepts have become part of the standard vocabulary, as evidenced for instance by their emergence in management accounting textbooks. “Action at a distance” and “fabrication” are examples of such ANT-based concepts that have gradually become normal parts of the management accounting vocabulary. This effect illustrates that the mobilization of method theories may advance the development of domain theory knowledge even though the method theories were only applied and not modified themselves.

Two potential implications arise from our study. The first one relates to the observation that sometimes domain theory and method theory are intermingled up to the point that making a distinction between them is a true challenge. Economics for instance has affected the thinking, conceptual base and research of management accounting to such an extent that the two fields are at times close to being integrated. If the distinction between domain theory and method theory in this case is not acknowledged, it may be that economics-based studies are seen as representative of all accounting research and no need is felt to apply other approaches, leading to increasing homogeneity of research. As our analysis of ANT indicates, something similar – though likely on a much smaller scale – can take place over time in the case of other method theories, too, even though their application would be originally narrower and easier to distinguish than in the case of economics vis-à-vis management accounting. Increasing researchers’ awareness of the distinction between domain theory and method theory is therefore important as it is likely to increase their susceptibility and capability to identify the opportunities of, and justification for, theoretical pluralism (Lukka & Mourißen, 2002).

The second implication of our study concerns the motivations for which various method theories are applied in management accounting research. Informal discussions among academics sometimes reflect an attitude according to which certain method theories would be now “in” and some others “already out”, even though these views would not be based on any epistemological grounds. The danger that lies therein is that researchers do not really explore and adopt the method theories they are applying in a thorough
scholarly manner, but only superficially, in the “social theory of the month” spirit. Such transient view and use of method theories can effectively reduce them to fads or fashions (Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999), a phenomenon which arguably diminishes the ability of social sciences, including accounting, to accumulate knowledge and develop comprehensive theories (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

To conclude, our analysis illustrated that the roles of domain theory and method theory in published studies can be identified and different forms of interplay between them can be observed. Such results are most likely observable in the case of other method theories utilized in management accounting research besides ANT but further research is needed to confirm whether this is in fact the case.

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