Guest Editorial: Social impact in accounting: Is it at risk of becoming a hembig concept and does this matter?

Cherrie Yang
Auckland University of Technology
cherrie.yang@aut.ac.nz

Susan O'Leary
Royal Holloway, University of London
Susan.Oleary@rhul.ac.uk

Helen Tregidga
Royal Holloway, University of London
Helen.Tregidga@rhul.ac.uk

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Guest Editorial: Social Impact in Accounting: Is it at risk of becoming a hembig concept and does this matter?

Purpose: In addition to introducing the papers that contribute to the special section on "Accounting for Social Impact", the purpose of this editorial is to prompt critical reflection and discussion on the concept of social impact in accounting research and practice.

Approach: We draw on Alvesson and Blom's (2021) hembig concept to frame our discussion. After briefly introducing the hembig concept, we discuss social impact in accounting research and practice in relation to it before reflecting on potential implications. We then introduce the contributions to this special section.

Findings: While we argue that social impact in accounting is not a hembig concept, we suggest that it is potentially at risk of becoming one. In light of this discussion, we identify the importance of conceptual clarity in the use of social impact within accounting research and practice, given the potential for conceptual ambiguity.

Research implications: Our editorial aims, which are reflected in this special section are not only to stimulate qualitative research on accounting for social impact but to also encourage further critical engagement with the concept and its use. We suggest that the concept of social impact and its use within accounting research and practice would benefit from further conversations and critical reflection.

Originality: We consider the concept of social impact within accounting in relation to the hembig concept.

1. Introduction

The concept of social impact appears to be everywhere. The "impact agenda" as it is often referred to, is pervasive, occupying various aspects of research, practice, and, within our own institutional environments, university life. It would seem that a focus on demonstrating and communicating social impact has become more and more important. This is perhaps not surprising, nor unwarranted, given the significant global challenges we face and their social implications. Global challenges, such as climate change, ecosystem harm, conflict, migration, populism and, more recently, COVID-19 and responses to it, require immediate attention and action by individuals and various institutions. Organisations worldwide from large multinational corporations, with their significant power and influence, down to local grassroots associations are all increasingly being held to account for their significant social (and environmental) impacts. Within the financial context, there appears to be increasing interest in instruments positioned to create (positive) social impact alongside financial returns, for example impact investment and impact bonds (e.g. Cooper et al., 2016). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other not-for-profit organisations worldwide are also stepping in to fill social impact voids created by national governments. These organisations are often contracted by governments and government departments to bring about positive social impacts and are accountable to a range of stakeholders for their activities. NGO's and other purpose-based organisations can also advocate for those who experience negative impact but have little or no ability to hold the parties which created the negative impact to account.

Accounting research and practice has not escaped the turn to social impact, and the concept holds much relevance to the accounting discipline. As Killian and O'Regan (2020) identify in their discussion of accounting and the public interest, there are several reasons for this. For example, accounting has the capacity to impact behaviour and decision-making. Accounting is not neutral and can be an instrument of power and responsibility. Accounting has the potential to enable legitimacy and promote trust between various institutions and sectors needed for the interdependent nature of the global tasks that face us. Moreover, accounting lends itself to measurement and reporting, and, as noted by Hines (1988), constructs, rather than simply reflects, the ways in which we see and describe the world, suggesting that it can be a force for change. Furthermore, accounting can serve as a means of co-ordinating and legitimising inter-organisational relationships and networks (e.g. Ferry and Ahrens, 2021; Ferry and Slack, 2021). For example, in the NGO space, reporting practices and performance measurement can link funders and governments to NGOs and grassroots organisations, and establish the basis of accountability relationships between several entities (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2007, 2010; O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; Boomsma and O'Dwyer, 2019). However, these practices are often found to serve a narrow group of stakeholders' information needs rather than more holistically accounting for broader social relationships, interdependencies and collaborations of individuals and organisations (Killian and O'Regan, 2020).

Moreover, an increased public interest in accounting for social impact has pushed for rigorous and accountable social impact performance data and reporting standards (Nicholls, 2018). Consequently, several accountancy and consultancy firms and practitioners (e.g. New Philanthropy Capital, Social

Value International, nfpSynergy) have arisen to provide training and analysis in measuring and reporting social impact. The development of the Global Impact Investing Reporting Standards by the Global Impact Investing Network demonstrates the demand for 'better' impact reporting. At a national level, the New Zealand 2020 Wellbeing Budget mandates that reasonable social impact data needs to be measured and reported. A comparative study of the four countries of the United Kingdom shows that social impact has become implicated in a broader regulatory space and has started to be considered more in local government audit and reporting (Ferry and Ahrens, 2021). For example, Ferry and Ahrens (2021) note that the 2015 Well-being of Future Generations Act in Wales has expedited its local authorities to adopt wider scope reports. Under the Act, a focus on sustainable development complements financial statements, and includes the use of impact audits of performance and Value for Money[1]. While such practices are a welcome addition to national discourses on issues such as sustainability and social impact, many have cautioned against simply applying financial accounting techniques to social impact (Cooper et al., 2016). Moreover, the initiatives implemented in Wales are not replicated across the entire UK, with England, Scotland and Northern Ireland employing different regulatory practices in relation to social impact (see also Adams et al., this issue for a discussion of social impact reporting in Australia). Deviations such as these are amongst the many reasons that authors such as Nicholls (2018) have argued for a clear conceptualisation of the distinctive features of social impact accounting.

In this editorial, before introducing the papers that make up this special section on accounting for social impact, we first provide a reflection on the concept of social impact within accounting. We draw on Alvesson and Blom's (2021) hembig concept to frame this discussion. A hembig concept, a term coined by Alvesson and Blom (2021) and discussed in Alvesson and Sandberg (2020), is an acronym for a hegemonic, ambiguous, big concept. It is defined as a "scientific concept characterised by its broad scope and ambiguous meanings, which at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, through its dominance crowds out other less fashionable concepts or prevents the development of a more precise terminology" (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020, p.3). Alvesson and Blom (2021, p.3) argue that "the aggregate of meanings and 'all-inclusive' treatment of some popular concepts in organisation studies make them appear as exceptionally important and broadly applicable. But this also makes the use of concepts intellectually problematic and a source of ambiguity and confusion." Furthermore, these "big concepts tend to exercise a hegemonic influence on researchers because it is difficult to escape them" and "review publications, special issue editors and researchers are often eager to build

[1] Value for money is a term largely used in the public sector accounting and audit. In general, it is used to assess whether public sector organisations are accountable for the economic, efficient and effective management of the resources entrusted to them.

these" (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2020). Here, we consider whether or not social impact within accounting is a hembig concept and importantly, whether this matters and should concern us. We do so with the aim of prompting further conversation and critical reflection on the concept and its use within accounting.

Before proceeding further, it is essential to note three key interrelated points. First, we, not unproblematically and unreflexively, recognise the irony here and our role in legitimating this "hembig status" given our specific call for more qualitative research on accounting for social impact, specifically calling for research across various subfields in which the concept is used (O'Leary et al., n.d.). Second, while we will argue below that radical ambiguity or ambiguity in concept use can potentially cause problems, we recognise that ambiguity is not entirely and always problematic (see Eisenberg (1984) for a discussion of ambiguity and how it can be used to foster general agreement without limiting specific interpretations). Indeed, there are positive aspects to a hembig concept – including their ambiguity. For example, we note that our motivations for this special section in encouraging research in relation to social impact were most likely facilitated by the hembig nature of the term in attracting and gaining attention from researchers. Therefore, ambiguity, in this sense, can be enabling when seeking to draw attention to a multi-faceted and complex concept such as social impact. Lastly, we wish to clarify that in presenting our argument, and essentially calling for critical reflection on the concept of social impact and its use, we are not advocating for moves towards a single, more precise definition (i.e. a single understanding of what social impact is or what it might look like, or a single or limited view as to who constitutes 'the social'). Indeed, we would argue that this is not only impossible but also would be problematic in itself. It would risk over-specifying our understandings of the term and, as a consequence, silencing other potential understandings in relation to it. Rather, we are suggesting that it would be problematic if the concept was to become an empty 'catch-all' concept which is used unreflexively. The concept, and the need to address global and local challenges, is too important.

We hope that this discussion, therefore, and the critical reflection that it promotes, highlights the need to consider the meanings and use of the concept of social impact in accounting. Specifically, we suggest that while social impact within accounting research and practice is somewhat ambiguous, broad in scope and appears to be becoming more dominant, it is not a hembig. We note that while the concept has hegemonic appeal, potentially leading to its increasing use, it is not hegemonic in a sense that it crowds out other precise alternative terms (e.g. common good, public interest, and other terms which are more technical in nature, such as concerns with specific outputs and outcomes). We also suggest that the concept is not completely ambiguous *in use*. Despite recognising that the concept does not entirely meet the criteria of a hembig, we believe it is useful to reflect on the extant use of the concept of social impact in accounting in relation to the hembig problem and consider the implications (for example, conflating meanings and using various terms interchangeably) if both researchers and practitioners are not sufficiently careful and reflexive in using the concept. We believe that accounting for social impact research and practice is both necessary and timely, especially given the need to address key issues of contemporary importance. Yet, we also suggest that there would be benefits from further reflective consideration of the concept and its use(s) in the context of its growing prevalence.

We structure the paper as follows. After a brief introduction to the hembig concept, we reflect on social impact in accounting via this framing. We then raise some of the potential implications of the hembig concept in social impact accounting research and practice and reflect on some suggestions for moving discussions forward and implications for research in this area. Lastly, we introduce the papers that make up this special section.

2. The hembig concept

Alvesson and Blom's (2021) coining of the term hembig relates to a concern with concepts and their use within scholarly work. The clear use of concepts within academic research, particularly when communicating research with others, helps "sharpen thinking and communicate clearly" (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 1). At the same time, however, "the use of dominant, ambiguous, broad-ranging concepts in our field obstructs good research" (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p.2). While their discussion focuses on the field of organisational studies, we find their reflections highly relevant for accounting research and practice, specifically in relation to our focus on social impact. In this section, we briefly outline the hembig concept presented by Alvesson and Blom (2021) before reflecting on the concept of social impact and its potential use within the field of accounting research and practice as a hembig concept.

> "…*hembigs* – an acronym for hegemonic, ambiguous, big concepts. This seemingly oxymoronic concept draws on Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural and/or linguistic dominance at the expense of other alternative expressions and vocabulary. *Ambiguity* refers to vagueness and uncertainty associated with multiple, incoherent meanings attributed to the phenomena in question. *Big* concerns the unhelpful broad application and usage of the concept, simply covering 'too much'" (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 2).

As the above definition of a hembig notes, there are three key aspects that constitute the hembig concept. These are hegemony, ambiguity and big (or scope). The authors state that these three aspects of a hembig have the combined effects of “field domination with vagueness and a far too broad scope in language use”. In illustrating the hembig concept, Alvesson and Blom (2021) draw on the concepts of leadership, strategy and institutions within the organisational studies literature, which they argue have reached hembig status. Likewise, they discuss identity work and isomorphism as concepts that have not reached hembig status and illustrate that the hembig concept should not be applied to all scientific concepts.

The first aspect of a hembig, hegemony, relates to the concept of gaining “cultural and/or linguistic dominance at the expense of other alternative expressions and vocabulary” (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p.2). The risk here is that people “get dragged into this, take it for granted and embrace a consensus that hides the potential conflicts and problems” (p. 3). The concept becomes common sense, taken for granted and “impossible to resist” (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 3).

The second key aspect is ambiguity. Here ambiguity refers to “vagueness and uncertainty associated with multiple, incoherent meanings attributed to a phenomenon”, it “involves uncertainty that cannot be resolved or reconciled, and absence of agreement on boundaries, clear principles or solutions” (Alvessson and Blom, 2021, pp. 3-4). Importantly here, Alvesson and Blom (2021) distinguish between the nature of particular concepts and their *use.* Alvesson and Blom (2021, p.4) note in relation to ambiguity that “hembigs are usually *not* disputed on a larger scale, due to their hegemonic effect” and that “we accept and use these concepts without problematization or acknowledging the ambiguity”. They are “applied in such a way as to give the appearance that a solid phenomenon is being studied”, in a way which denies or represses ambiguity (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 4).

The last key aspect relates to big, and is used to capture the scope and “range of meanings attributed to a concept” (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 4). A hembig is considered a concept which has a broad scope. This is defined as involving “a large number of more or less coherent meanings, which typically also leads to the concept being applied and used in a wide-ranging set of contexts and situations” (Alvessson and Blom, 2021, p. 4). The risk here is that the “concept use then implies that diverse phenomena are, in fact, the same phenomenon” (p. 4). Alvesson and Blom (2021) note Haslam’s (1996) notion of “concept creep” where concepts swell, extend, and are applied in new contexts. An interesting observation here relates to what Alvesson and Blom (2021, pp. 4-5) refer to as ‘camouflaged sub-tribes’:

> “Sometimes these types of scope expansions result in a research community divided in ‘camouflaged sub-tribes’ that seemingly use the same concept, but with very varied meanings (Levines, 1985). In the best case, these sub-tribes are well aware of their differences and are able to navigate within and between the various tribes (Abbott, 2001). However, clarity and understanding are often limited, and confusion prevails. A broad conceptual scope *may or may not* lead to ambiguity (above), but the risk usually increases if the concept covers a broad terrain in terms of variations and applications”.

Again here in relation to scope, there is an important distinction and tension, relating to concepts “as such” and “how concepts are used” (Alvesson and Blom, 2021). This is an important aspect of the concept of social impact in accounting and we return to it in the following section.

3. Social impact in accounting: Is it a hembig concept?

> “In assessing the usage of concepts, one needs to consider all the components in the hembig: (a) is there a hegemonic element, in the sense that alternative, more precise, but less fashionable terms are not used; (b) are there signs of ambiguity (and not just clearly different definitions and variation); and (c) is the scope of what is addressed very large?” (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 11)

In this section we briefly reflect on the above discussion and each of the three criteria in relation to the concept of social impact in accounting. In doing so, we note that: 1) the three criteria are interconnected (as our discussion above illustrates); 2) our discussion includes literature that explicitly mentions social impact and that which we considered relevant to our conversation given its focus and key arguments; 3) our discussion is necessarily partial and selective (it is not possible within the space of a short editorial to include everything of relevance); and 4) our discussion is undertaken with the express purpose of beginning (or perhaps continuing) conversations about the concept of social impact and its use (rather than closing down any conversations). We also offer this discussion in the spirit of using the hembig concept as a prompt to reflect on the concept and its use, and in line with how we interpret Alvesson and Blom’s (2021, p. 11) intent of utilising hembig as a sensitising concept, not a construct for empirical testing. We also engage in this discussion with the aim of encouraging research and practice that is concerned with social impact, rather than attempting to close it down.

3.1 Hegemony

The first key aspect of the hembig concept is *hegemony.* As we have noted, social impact is a significant and emergent theme in accounting research and practice.[2] As a concept, it is relevant for, and has been researched in, a number of diverse fields (what Alvesson and Blom (2021) would refer to as "sub-tribes"). These include (yet are not limited to) the broad fields of public sector accounting, charity and NGO accounting (as well as other forms of not-for-profit organisations), social and sustainability accounting, and impact investing and social entrepreneurship.

By way of illustration of the use of social impact within the accounting literature, research within the charities and NGO contexts has been concerned with social impact in relation to accountability relationships with a variety of stakeholders such as funders and beneficiaries (Agyemang et al., 2017; O'Leary, 2017). This is perhaps a reflection of the growing emphasis within such organisations on the demonstration of social impact as a means of discharging accountability to funders and beneficiaries, in particular those with significant power (Ahrens et al., 2016).

A further focus in the literature, has been the consequences of accounting for performance and impact within internal organisational practices (Chenhall et al., 2013; 2017). Much of this research has been concerned with the creation of positive social impact, for example capturing aspects of performance not recognised in more traditional measurement and reporting accounting practices. However, within the social accounting literature, concern has often been expressed in relation to the negative impacts that (mostly large) organisations have. For example, research has examined the way in which performance and impacts are reported, including a consideration of the tendency to report positive information and the tone of reporting negative aspects (e.g. Hahn and Lülfs, 2014; Higgins and Walker, 2012) as well as that which has investigated external understandings of social impact and their societal consequences (e.g. Denedo et al., 2017; Dey et al., 2011).

In general, therefore, social impact in accounting research and practice is a topic of concern and is increasingly becoming a point of focus. As we have suggested, this is perhaps not surprising given the current global context. In order to address the urgency of global challenges, and given the increasing relevance of the social domain to accounting and accountability, a concern with social impact in accounting appears to be inherently the right thing to do. However, this inherent appeal, combined

[2] We have also noted that this trend is also evident in the higher education sector. As an illustrative example, we note the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings which measures "institutions' social and economic impact" (see www.timeshighereducation.com/news/impact-rankings-2021-results-announced).

with the concept's broad relevance, has potential hegemonic effects. The broad appeal and taken-for-granted perception makes a consideration (and in some cases the demonstration) of social impact almost impossible to escape and resist.

However, further, more nuanced reflections, are possible when the concept of social impact in accounting is considered in light of the hembig framing. As has been noted, one of the implications of a concept becoming hegemonic in a hembig sense is its ability to crowd out or replace alternative, perhaps more precise, terms. Our reading of the accounting literature suggests that social impact is, at present, an overarching concept, often used interchangeably with, alongside, or captured through, the use of other terms – including social benefit, social value, public interest, public benefit, common good, even accountability, and more utilitarian concepts of value, quality and effectiveness (Dellaportas and Davenport, 2008; Killian and O'Regan, 2020, Spencer, 2020). Indeed, the literature directly linked to an explicit focus on "social impact" per se has been more scant in nature with many studies only tangentially or implicitly relating their findings and insights to the concept of social impact itself. In this sense, social impact would seem to have hegemonic status at the broad level, and possibly within the practitioner context, but when engaged with in the research context, particularly at the empirical level, other, perhaps more specific concepts, often become the focus.

Given these reflections we would caution against jumping to any conclusion that the concept of social impact has become hegemonic in the sense that it has garnered dominant status and/or replaced these other concepts, at least within academic research. However, we would also suggest that the concept of social impact has hegemonic appeal as an umbrella concept and is being used across "sub-tribes". Furthermore, we would also suggest that while perhaps not reaching the status of concepts such as institutions and leadership, and not meeting this first criterion of a hembig concept, the use of the concept appears to be becoming increasingly hegemonic in both research and practice and the potential implications of this would benefit from further consideration. We return to this below.

3.2 Ambiguity

When considering the second criterion of a hembig concept, it is possible to identify that there has been much conceptual confusion or ambiguity both in research and practice as to what constitutes social impact. For example, does it relate to the outcomes or ex-post assessments of a particular initiative's accomplishments or is it a broader societal concept in terms of re-constituting societal relations and power structures in the furtherance of a more equal and just world? At what level and over what period of time do we assess societal impact – short-term, long-term or even generational? Who defines what social impact is? And on what basis do we come to understand and capture social impact? In general, we find that social impact in accounting research and practice lacks precise definition. Indeed if we consider the two aspects - *social* and *impact* that make up the concept – what constitutes social and what constitutes impact is not entirely clear and far from consistent.

However, when looking into the specific literatures and specific instances where the term is used, the criterion of ambiguity is again more nuanced and there appears to be some attempts to establish clarity. For example, the concept of social impact is often given a more precise meaning in the measurement and reporting literature. This is often through the use of specific tools in practice as the subject of research.

By way of illustration, social return on investment (SROI) is a frequently studied tool which attempts to specifically capture and measure social impact (Nicholls, 2009). Specifically it is a technique that aims to "…capture and quantify the value created by the work of social purpose organizations, using techniques of monetization and the expression of such a value as a ratio of benefits for investments" (Hall and Millo, 2018: 340). As its name suggests, it is analogous to a traditional ROI calculation, albeit one that seeks to evaluate the 'social', rather than financial, return, of an entity's investment. SROI, in comparison to other traditional social accounting and auditing practices, has been heralded as a tool that offers clarity, comparability and simplicity to the concept of social impact (Gibbon and Dey, 2011); this is in essence a tool which provides an "evidence base". As such, based on impact results, users of SROI are said to be able to focus on decisions and choose between different options with different impacts. By using SROI, both what constitutes *social* and *impact* within the context it is utilised is said to be constructed.

A disappointing, yet recurring, theme in many accounting studies, however, has been that social impact measurement and reporting practices, such as SROI, are implemented to appease formal, narrow and funder-driven hierarchical accountability requirements rather than attempts to fully realise and analyse the social impact a particular organisation is working towards (Dey, 2007; O'Dwyer, 2005). So the focus and concern within such studies are largely related to a concern with the concept in use, including the reductionist way in which it is often employed through various precise definitions and accompanying measurement and reporting practices. In particular, impact measurement tools are often critiqued for being related to performance rather than impact.

We can also look to the charities literature for further definitions and attempts at construct clarity. For example, Ebrahim and Rangan (2010, p.3) define social impact as "a logic chain of results in which organisational inputs and activities lead to a series of outputs, outcomes and ultimately to a set of societal impacts". Outputs are further defined as the goods and services that the organisation produces (e.g. the number of beneficiaries that received such services), while outcomes are noted to relate to the change in beneficiaries' circumstances brought about by the outputs. As such, here, the notion of *impact* appears to be understood and given clarity by comparing it with several other terms, with an emphasis on longer-term sustained changes at a community or societal level (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014). While such definitions are not without problems or contestation (for example, on what basis 'short-term' and 'long-term' is distinguished or a lack of consensus on the targeted groups that impact should be of focus and measured) we would, however, suggest that the concept of social impact is again in some ways defined in its use.

There are several points that can be made on the basis of our reflections on the ambiguity of social impact in accounting. First, there does appear to be a diverse set of meanings, and potentially even a lack of agreement, on meanings. The ramifications are that inconsistent interpretations of social impact in accounting, if not clearly communicated, have the potential to create confusion for researchers and practitioners in understanding, assessing, demonstrating and communicating social impact. However, there also appears to be attempts to define the concept, a sense that it carries particular meanings within particular literatures or contexts in practice, and that there is contestation with regard to its meaning.

As Alvesson and Blom (2021, p. 4) note, ambiguity, in a hembig sense, is when "scientific concepts are used in order to deny or repress ambiguity. They are applied in such a way as to give the appearance that a solid phenomenon is being studied" with the "possibility that what appears to be *one* phenomenon may be seen as a *variety of phenomena* is not addressed". Our reading of the accounting literature suggests that while the use of the concept is not unproblematic or free of ambiguity and contestation, it is not radically ambiguous in a hembig sense. Hembigs "are usually *not* disputed on a larger scale, due to their hegemonic effect; we accept and use these concepts without problematisation of acknowledging the ambiguity" (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 4). It would appear from our discussion that problematizing and acknowledging ambiguity is evident, indeed, the literature which critiques the way in which accounting defines and operationalises the concept is alive and well. We discuss this aspect further below.

3.3 Scope

As noted above, scope refers to the range of meanings attributed to a concept. A large scope involves "a large number of more or less coherent meanings, which typically leads to the concept being applied and used in a wide-ranging set of contexts and situations" (Alvesson and Blom, 2021. 4). Our discussion of hegemony and ambiguity noted the various literatures and contexts within which the concept of social impact is used and is relevant for our consideration of this final criterion.

As we have suggested, social impact in accounting can be understood as an umbrella concept. This has perhaps contributed to its relevance and appeal in various streams of accounting literature and in various practitioner contexts. As we have noted, the concept is now evident in, for example, the broad fields of public sector accounting, charity and NGO accounting (as well as other forms of not-for-profit organisations), social and sustainability accounting, and impact investing and social entrepreneurship. The use and scope of this concept within accounting research and practice is perhaps particularly evident in recent years in line with an increasing focus on impact, and a concern with change within broader society. In reflecting on the scope of the social impact concept within accounting it is perhaps useful to illustrate further its use in several literatures.

As we have already noted, one area where social impact is a key focus is measurement and reporting research. Here, there have been investigations of tools that can be used to capture, measure and/or report social impact. This type of research seeks to "understand (in social, environmental and economic terms) what difference an organisation's activities make to the world and communicate that value to the organisation itself and to its stakeholders" (Gibbon and Dey, 2011, p. 64). These measurement and reporting tools have included social accounting and auditing (SAA), narrative reporting (Morgan, 2013), social return on investment (SROI) (Nicolls, 2009; Gibbon and Dey, 2011), and social impact bonds (Cooper et al., 2016). This diverse research has noted a range of challenges relating to social impact measurement and reporting, including the difficulty of measuring impacts, translating impacts into comparable units of measurement (Nicolls, 2009) and attributing particular elements of (often long-term) social impact to a particular organisation. Other areas where social impact is evident is within research on regulation and policy, for example that which examines the regulatory and policy environment surrounding organisations that seek to have a societal impact (see, for example, Nicolls 2010; Everett and Friesen 2010). In addition, research on NGO accountability has seen a concern with how NGOs create social impact through their various development and humanitarian initiatives (Dixon et al., 2006; Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe, 2011; O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2010; O'Leary, 2017), while social accounting has considered the impact of organisations on a range of various stakeholders (Denedo et al., 2017; Gray et al., 1997).

The use of social impact in accounting is broad in scope, found in many different areas of accounting research and applied in different ways. Alvesson and Blom (2021) state that a hembig concept is used loosely to account for a set of diverse phenomena, but by using related terminologies and concepts, diverse phenomena are at risk of becoming the same phenomenon. Given social impact in accounting consists of various terms and meanings and is broad in scope, there is the potential that, over time, it could come to be simply understood and used to represent a sum of all terms in general. This, again, as Alvesson and Blom (2021) would indicate, has potential implications. We discuss these, and what can be done about them, in the next section.

In summary, for a concept to be considered a hembig it must score high on all three criteria: hegemonic, ambiguous and big. That is, we can identify a hembig by "its broad and diverse use, tendency to, over time, crowd out other concepts (even if they would be more precise or helpful for the purpose of representation) and the high and escalating level of ambiguity, typically due to the expansion of the use of the concept." (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 5). In our view, and based on our discussion above, we do not believe that social impact within accounting currently constitutes a hembig. However, we do believe that it is potentially at risk of becoming one, and, given the hegemonic potential, evident ambiguity and scope in its use, the problematization that results from considering it in relation to the hembig concept signals that we should, at the least, engage in more critical reflection on the concept and its use. As such, we reflect next on the potential implications of the hembig problem and some suggestions to deal with the problem.

4. Some implications and reflections

Social impact in accounting does not appear, at present, to constitute a hembig but we have suggested that it does risk becoming one. This is particularly so when we consider the temporal element of concept use and development and that "over time, hembig qualities may vary, typically going up when a concept is fashionable and the temptation to follow the flow becomes so strong that it is used without much care or discipline" (Alvesson and Blom, 2021, p. 13). As such, in this section we note not only three potential implications that can be drawn from our reflections above, but also what can be done in relation to them.

4.1 A focus on concept definition alongside tools and practices

As our discussion suggests, social impact has hegemonic appeal and is mostly taken-for-granted due to its overriding appeal and relevance – and its ambition for change. Accordingly, and given the concept is often associated with positive (rather than negative) impacts, the focus of social impact in accounting has largely not been on whether or not impact should be achieved and demonstrated, but instead on how to improve impact measures, enhance impact disclosures and better engage with different stakeholders, for instance. These endeavours might be helpful for practical investigations of social impact, however, the hegemonic effects of social impact should also be recognised in order to foster reflective thinking and debates on what social impact is being referred to as well as the implications of the definition of the concept in use.

Extant concerns with social impact accounting illustrates the need to critically reflect on social impact in the manner suggested above. For example, it is well documented that in order to receive funding, social purpose organisations often need to engage in market-based processes of competitive tendering and contracting, and adhere to strict reporting requirements to account for the use of such funds once attained and their social impacts. The aim here is to establish and "prove" that organisations 'do good' through a focus on the measurement of social impact. This has been noted to have various effects. For example, demonstrating social impact in accounting has been noted to derive mainly from the intentions of powerful stakeholders, e.g. charity funders, rather than the organisation's own internal desires (Ógáin et al., 2012; Yang and Northcott, 2018). As such, many charities appear reluctant to measure and report social impact in a meaningful sense and often only pursue such measurements to the point of meeting funders' minimum requirements (Thomson, 2011).

Others have noted how such practices have led to an encroachment of neo-liberal and market-based rationalities into areas previously considered to be 'social' and not amenable to the logic of the market (Cooper et al., 2016). Here, the consequences of the neo-liberal logic are that the specifics of impact measurement practices, and their relationship with the 'social', become inconsequential in favour of the presence of *evidence* of 'doing good' (Hoffman and St. John, 2017). For example, Cooper et al. (2016) highlight how the enabling properties of assessment metrics in Social Impact Bonds allows the state to link its spending to particular social outcomes, with little concern for what these outcomes actually are or how they are achieved. Further research has shown that conceptually evaluating social impact is problematic, particularly the intransigent issue of actually defining what social impact means and signifies. Specifically, questions arise as to whose interpretation of impact counts, and where the boundaries (in both time and space) around the notion of impact can be drawn (Cashmore et al., 2010).

The question of whose interpretation of social impact counts is an important one. The NGO accountability literature – although not specifically focused on social impact – has investigated the notion of downward accountability which, if implemented correctly, is said to improve the lives of an NGO's intended beneficiaries. It is described as an "openness to involving beneficiaries in determining the nature of [NGO] work and its impact" (O'Dwyer and Unerman, 2007, p. 450). Therefore, Agyemang et al. (2009) firmly identify participation as the key downward accountability mechanism. Awio et al. (2011) propose that the strength and success of downward accountability are greater in communities characterised by a high degree of social capital where there is a high incidence of trust, a strong sense of voluntarism, dense associational life, and a diverse and heterogeneous composition. However, the possibility that certain understandings of social impact will emerge in these participatory engagements is often limited. Studies have shown that beneficiaries often conceive themselves to be in a weak position due to a fear of losing the benefits of NGO development initiatives, which is acutely the case in contexts of extreme poverty and vulnerability. Beneficiaries are said to possess a sense of "self-perceived relative powerlessness" in relation to NGOs (Agyemang et al., 2009, p. 31). This is often hampered by insufficient time and/or capacity amongst beneficiaries to engage in or even fully understand downward accountability dialogues (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010) which can be a result of illiteracy and communication issues within developing communities (Awio et al., 2011). Beneficiaries are often consumed with the challenges of everyday living in these contexts, and reflecting on the social impact of NGOs frequently does not feature high on their list of priorities (Agyemang et al., 2009). Furthermore, Jayasinghe and Wickramasinghe (2011, p. 397) propose that "the logic of everyday actions" in certain communities is not aligned with Western notions of performance measurement which can often be associated with social impact.

Looking across the various streams of accounting research, studies on social impact have not necessarily investigated the nature of social impact nor the effects it has on those who are supposed to be 'impacted' and the extent to which they have been involved in these efforts.[3] Yet this would seem central. What is also illustrated through this discussion is a need for researchers to be critically reflective in their use of the concept. Without doing so there is perhaps the risk of investigating a

[3] We would perhaps suggest the work on counter-accounts and dialogic accounting has the potential to view social impact in an altered sense and place more focus on those impacted. There are two main tenets to this literature: first, the problematizing of institutional practices, for example attempts to create social impact; second, the production of counter-accounts in which social impact, through the inclusion of a wider spectrum of perspectives and voices, appears differently to that embedded within institutional discourse and practice. To this effect, the task the dialogic accounting literature has taken upon itself is to promote a more dialogic understanding of societal impact; that is to allow a plurality of voices and ways of knowing to co-produce a version of societal impact in a particular context. This is not an attempt to create a consensus on impact (Habermas, 1981; Unerman and Bennett, 2004) nor a blended form of social impact assessment (Nicholls, 2009), but rather to allow a co-existence of numerous, often diverse, renderings of social impact that speak and inform one another, but ultimately do not coalesce.

concept that is ill-defined and poorly understood. Indeed as identified by Killian and O'Regan (2020), the role of accounting as being in support of some form of public interest has been under-developed and confined to the definitions and initiatives promoted by the profession itself. This of course does not mean that we need a single understanding of what impact is being sought or what it might look like, or a single or limited view as to who constitutes the social. Being overly prescriptive on what social impact should or should not look like is itself problematic. Tight definitions of impact and how it is to be measured, for example, SROI as noted by Gibbon and Dey (2011) and discussed above, show the risk over-specifying our understandings of the term and, as a consequence, silencing other potential understandings in relation to it. Rather, what is needed is a consideration and clarity as to what the concept of social impact means when it is used, and to what extent it has been co-produced through the communities and individuals that are supposed to be 'impacted'.

We have a concern that social impact in accounting could, without sufficient consideration, become an empty 'catch-all' concept that covers everything but means nothing and can be hardly operationalised, like 'strategy' as another hembig concept recognised by Alvesson and Blom (2021). This, we would argue, would be problematic given the important role accounting has and the urgent need for change. We would also suggest that it would have implications on the communication of research, and the engagements and interactions with practitioner communities and other interested communities as we note in the next section.

4.2 Communicating social impact and awareness of the risks of "impact washing"

As we have argued, accounting for social impact appears to be associated and overloaded with diverse and related concepts, including social benefit, social value, public interest, public benefit, common good, accountability, effectiveness, outcomes and outputs. While the concept and use of social impact in the accounting literature could be seen as an indicator of diversity, this ambiguity faces the danger of knowing nothing really about social impact and creating considerable confusion to 'scratch beneath the surface' (Alvesson and Blom, 2021). As we have suggested, social problems can be circumvented rather than addressed and accounted for when the concept of social impact in accounting is used in ambiguous and unreflexive ways. This could lead to problems when conducting and communicating research, especially if understandings and their differences are not shared or recognised between, for example, research and practice.

The ability to understand and evaluate the impact of individuals and organisations is potentially concealed and constrained by the unhelpful ambiguous conception and use of social impact in accounting. A return to the measurement and reporting research is helpful here. For example, Gibbon and Dey (2011) caution against the apparent appeal of SROI figures, particularly in the context of 'soft' impacts that are typical of social purpose organisations. They claim that they are reductionist, 'dumbed-down' and often merely approximations or 'financial proxies' driven by funder priorities for social impact information rather than a true and meaningful representation of social impact. They succinctly highlight four main shortcomings of SROI as a tool of social impact measurement: first, the potential for the figure to be subjective and easily manipulated depending on who undertakes the calculations; second, comparability of the figure across organisations is problematic given calculative issues such as quality and availability of data, causality and correlation problems, and timeframes used; third, the limited take up of SROI amongst social-purpose organisations which negates its claimed comparability potential; and finally, the problems involved with relying on a single sole indicator of social impact.

Additionally, the ambiguity of social impact in accounting can potentially lead to subjective interpretations of impact results. For example, there are several impact measurement approaches from which the impact (or output and outcome) results can be measured and interpreted differently. Due to the increasing competition for funding and a desire to gain legitimacy for impact-related activities, there is a tendency for individuals and organisations to select those social impact measurements that can demonstrate higher levels of impact (Costa and Pesci, 2016). As such, social impact in accounting risks being understood by what can be easily measured and selectively reported to demonstrate a higher level of impact to gain organisational legitimacy. Engaging in conversations and co-producing understandings of measurement (Yang and Northcott, 2019), for example, may help create new ways to understand social impact. However, we must acknowledge the powerful hegemonic effects of some stakeholders that could prevent effective discussion, debate and critique in such co-productions (Yang and Northcott, 2019).[4]

This ambiguity has the potential implication of leading to impact washing - an emerging concern, in particular for the investment community. Impact has been identified as one of the most significant challenges in the impact investment industry (Global Impact Investing Network, 2020). Similar to 'greenwashing', impact washing is the act of adopting the label of social impact without adequately generating and measuring it in accordance with investors' desire to allocate capital with reference to specific impact results. The Global Impact Investing Network survey (2018) shows that greater

[4] See www.podcastorperish.ca/episodes/episode-010-markus-milne for an interesting discussion of similar aspects relating to corporate 'sustainability' reporting.

transparency on impact strategy and results would help mitigate the issue of impact washing. While this issue arises from the impact investment industry, the insights transcend the investment context and highlights the importance of concept clarity.

The risk of impact washing and other implications of concept ambiguity would appear to increase if the potential hembig problem of social impact in accounting is not taken seriously. Of course the focus here should not, as we have already noted, be the unachievable task of eliminating difference in the way social impact is understood in different contexts nor to impose single reductionist definitions or measures of social impact. Rather we should work with research participants within our studies (practitioners, policy makers and other communities of interest) to fully and precisely understand what they seek to achieve when engaging in activities that assess and report social impact.

4.3 Avoiding hembig status

Alvesson and Blom (2021, p.14) note that the developments and qualities of hembig concepts may change (going up or down) over time, but as the concepts turn to hembigs "they are difficult to rock". As we have argued, social impact in accounting is not yet a hembig concept. However, our discussion essentially highlights the need for accounting researchers who use social impact in their research to use the concept with awareness and care. We should not assume that the meaning of social impact is *a priori* understood nor is (consciously or unconsciously) vague or ill-defined so as to obscure its purpose and intent in particular contexts. Rather we should intentionally seek to interrogate the meaning of social impact in these contexts thereby reducing the potential for unchecked ambiguity in the way we mobilise the concept within our research. We should not neglect this problem by continuing to unconsciously facilitate the hembig concept development. More conversations and research are needed in terms of what is social impact and what it is not in the variety of different domains in which it is used. These conversations are likely to require the participation of both researchers and other communities of interest, such as practitioners and policy makers.

It can be done by starting to specify the meaning of social impact referred to in a particular context and unpacking various related concepts encompassed within the concept of social impact. In doing so, it is important to pay more and careful attention to the underlying and sometimes subtle variations in meanings and use of social impact in accounting. For example, researchers when analyzing practice are likely to need to develop a detailed empirically-grounded understanding of what practitioners actually mean when they talk about social impact and how they construct their meanings as well as what consequences that has for organisations, society and accounting. In examining meanings that practitioners assign to the term social impact, and maybe also problematizing them, there is a role to play in helping to avoid social impact becoming a hembig term not only in research but also in practice.

In order to know more about social impact in accounting and what it constitutes, future research is suggested to consider the boundaries of the hembig concept to give a fuller picture and more in-depth understanding of the multiple ways in which social impact accounting is mobilised in practice. This would not only assist in the research process, sharpen thinking and deepen insights, but would also assist in the clear communication of that research and its implications.

5. Introducing the contributions to this special section.

Through our call for papers we invited researchers to engage with the topic of "Accounting for Social Impact". In this section we introduce the three papers that make up this special section, each of which investigates a specific aspect of accounting for social impact. These papers contribute to the understanding of social impact in accounting; they also work toward preventing the concept from becoming a hembig since the authors attempt to provide greater understanding of the concept of social impact and use it in specific contexts with care and awareness. While not our original intent or agenda, each of the three papers included, two which focus on impact measurement and one on reporting impact measures, reflect the hembig problem and implications as discussed above. We will briefly introduce each of them now.

Ruff's (2021) paper highlights the range and diversity, as well as the alternative results achieved, of various impact measurement tools. Drawing on six impact assessments of three impact measurement tools (theory of change, social return on investment and a dashboard) that have been applied to the same data of a charity, Ruff (2021) presents interesting empirical evidence of the nature and extent of using different tools for the same charity and charitable work. Her study finds that impact results from the assessments are very different, ranging from highly favourable to highly unfavourable, and identifies significant omissions and misrepresentations in the impact results, which reconfigure the charity and charitable work in various ways. Amongst the practical implications of this study is the identification of the need for analysts to be supported to identify biases in the measures they use and be aware of the sorts of omissions and misrepresentations possible. Again, highlighting the need to be critically reflexive in relation to social impact and how it is enacted.

Valero-Silva and Jones (2021) also analyse social impact measurement in a specific context, social housing. They apply a realist theory-based approach to the study of a small number of social housing organisations and leaders within the sector to explore the use of social impact measurement. The paper addresses three questions: why is social impact measurement being adopted in this sector? How is it successfully implemented? And what happens (outcomes) when it is successfully implemented? Their paper again connects with our discussion above. Their paper provides empirically grounded insights into the use of social impact measurement. They present findings into the way in which social impact measurement is utilised and the role it plays in determining such things as organisational priorities, ultimately providing a "snapshot of the current understanding of how the practice of social impact measurement occurs within the English Housing Sector" (p. 22). They highlight the importance of recognising the context and social system where impact measurements practices are embedded.

The findings of both papers align with our argument of the hembig problem and its implications and have demonstrated that it is problematic to assess and measure social impact in accounting without defining and understanding what social impact means and signifies and its contextual environment. They also demonstrate how the use of various social impact measurement tools define what constitutes social impact through defining such things as what impact is measured and from whose perspective.

Adams et al. (2021) investigate the standardisation of social impact reporting, in Australian charities. They consider to what extent, or in which respects, standardisation services the public interest. They consider the diverse views on standardisation in social impact reporting drawing on interviews from a range of stakeholders engaged with social impact reporting and consider them in relation to the aggregative, processual and common good perspectives of public interest. From their analysis they note that stakeholder views align with aggregative and processual concepts of public interest, however find these to be partial and contested. They argue that accounting standards for social impact reporting will "only serve the public interest if they also capture and implement the common good approach" (p. 1). They outline the practical role for accounts in serving the public interest in line with these different conceptions. This paper demonstrates the broad and emerging scope of social impact in accounting by focusing on what they refer to as the "emergent, diverse and dynamic practice" (p.4) of social impact reporting and its standardisation. They also highlight the diversity of views on the standardisation of social impact reporting within their empirical setting. They directly and usefully engage in a critical reflection on the meaning of social impact, drawing on conceptualisations of public interest.

In closing, we wish to thank the authors, reviewers and editors each who contributed to making this special section possible. We hope readers will engage with each of these papers and the contributions they make – as well as reflect on the social impact concept in accounting and its implications.

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