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“If Accountability is Everything, Maybe it’s Nothing”

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When Professor Yang first contacted me about presenting a paper at this symposium, I was just a little hesitant; three years of retirement had lured into believing that I would never again have to submit or present a conference paper. But then I noticed the title of the symposium: “Advancing Accountability Studies in a Changing World”. While most of the contributors obviously viewed the symposium as an opportunity to expand the subject’s reach into new and problematic areas, I saw it as an opportunity to revisit an issue I raised in an earlier assessment of our emerging field – an issue that is central to a larger project I have undertaken since formally abandoning the classroom.

The general project I have been working on can best be described as a comparative intellectual history involving two governance-related ideas that at some point achieved¹ “age of” status:² planning and accountability. From at least the 1920s through the 1960s, it was common to read references to “age of planning”, reflecting the fact that the concept had become widely accepted as THE solution to many, if not most, of a society’s problems. By the 1930s, the influence of the idea was global, in part spurred on by the proliferation of Soviet-inspired x-year national plans being initiated in the interwar period.³ Writing to his daughter Indira from prison in 1933, Jawaharlal Nehru observed that the idea of planning had “impressed itself on the imagination of the world.... Everybody talks of ‘planning’ now, and of Five-Year and Ten-Year and Three-Year plans. The Soviets have put magic in the word.” (Quoted in Huber, 2017, 3.) In a 1949 book on economic planning, future Nobel Laureate (1979) W. Arthur Lewis explained that

There are no longer any believers in *laisser-faire* [sic], except on the lunatic fringe. There are many who denounce planning in fierce language, and who appear by implication to be arguing for *laisser-faire*, but, on closer examination there are always a few pages in

¹ Since I will be engaging in a historical project, I have decided to treat efforts to deal with the concept of accountability in the past tense.

² An alternative label might be that they are among the “magical” concepts we use in governance-related studies (see (Pollitt and Hupe, 2011; Bentzen et al., 2024)), but that characterization fails to reflect the distinctive of both terms as dominant or “über” concepts.

³ Even though he found it politically risky to openly adopt an elaborate national planning policy given its association with the Soviet plans and liberal policymakers in Germany, even Adolph Hitler quietly endorsed a Four-Year Plan scheme that would be overseen by Hermann Göring. (Overy, 2017)

their books which give the game away. The truth is that we are all planners now. (Lewis, 1949, 17.)

The “age of accountability” is increasingly referred to in studies and commentaries in a variety of arenas. Elizabeth Fischer used the phrase to characterize governance in the European Union (Fisher, 2004) while Kathryn Sikkink applies it in her study of the growing number of criminal prosecutions of state officials for human rights violations. (Sikkink, 2012) The phrase is most frequently used in the education field where various forms of assessment have been adopted globally (see Hopmann, 2008), and it is clearly implied in Onora O’Neill’s widely known critical analysis of the “revolution in accountability”. (O’Neill, 2002)

While both concepts are frequently used in the domain of governance studies, they are semantically quite different. Planning is closely associated with “actions” (e.g., developing and implementing plans) and specific actors (i.e., planners), while accountability is broadly indicative of a (typically) desirable condition of constraint on the conduct of governance.⁴ For purposes of my project, however, what they have shared is a distinct status as “über concepts” (Flinders, 2011, 597.) during distinct periods.

With that general project in mind, I have returned to the issue I attempted to address more than 20 years ago: the issue of *conceptualizing accountability sui generis*. Put simply, what constitutes the core subject of our field? After decades of research focused on the phenomenon we call accountability, have we finally reached some reasonable consensus about how to describe what it is that we spend our time studying?

Accountability: Is there a there there?

I begin with the observation that many (if not most) of the publications in our field seem to be written following a common template. The opening sentence or two of each study

⁴ Here I am obviously more interested in the “virtuous” version of the concept. See (Bovens, 2010).

highlights the importance of accountability in general or in the specific arena being addressed by the paper. This is usually followed by the authors admitting that, despite the importance and relevance of accountability, it is not possible to provide a definition for this highly “contested” concept, which they then characterize as “elusive,” chameleon-like, “ever expansive,” “fuzzy” and even “magical”. At that point the authors proceed to dive into what one author describes as the “bottomless swamp”⁵ of imprecise alternative definitions, synonyms or frameworks used in previous studies, and in the end they usually select a version of accountability that is most suitable for their project. In this way the field of accountability studies tends to move “forward”, but always in a “sideways” direction that takes the collective endeavor nowhere.

There have been more than several attempts to deal with the conceptual issue. It is a problem I attempted to address more than two decades ago in a series of Fulbright lectures and a conference paper with the admittedly audacious title of “Seeking Salvation for Accountability.” (Dubnick, 2002) At the time I was (attitudinally, at least) on a mission of sorts, one focused on drawing attention to what I regarded as the scholarly “mistreatment” of the field’s “core concept” which, at the time, I designated as *accountability*_c. In that paper I argued that studies of accountability related to governance (broadly defined as the search for social order), had suffered at the hands of the “rhetoricians, reformers and functionalists” who stretched, twisted and transformed accountability to serve the requirements of their own political and research agendas. But having made the critical point, I failed to deliver a “solution” to the problem. Correcting for this, I argued, involves foregoing the search for a common definition of accountability and accepting the fact that we are dealing with a concept subject to “problems of ambiguity and incommensurability” – a concept that can only be understood and analyzed within the context of the paradigmatic frames in which it is being applied. Elaborating four such frames relevant to the concept of accountability (institutional, social transactional, organizational,

⁵ “...accountability appears to reside in a ‘bottomless swamp’, where the more definitive we attempt to render the concept, the more murky it becomes.” (Sinclair, 1995, 221.)

environmental), I proffered the view that *accountability_c* is best treated as “a form of governance that depends on the dynamic social interactions and mechanisms created within...a moral community.”(@7)

Several others have attempted to deal with the inherent miasmatic condition that plagues our field, including our symposium’s co-convenors. Professor Yang’s 2012 survey of the concept’s treatment within the public administration literature highlighted various major themes, each approaching the subject as an exogenous variable but leaving unanswered central questions that would produce a concept that can be applied as “actionable knowledge.” With that objective in mind, he made a strong case for developing middle-range theories and offers a model that provides a foundation for such a framework.

Professor Schillemans’ 2013 survey of a wide range of “accountability research” in six disciplines⁶ concluded that “the level of conceptual confusion might sometimes be exaggerated whilst the contours of a minimal definitional consensus are actually visible” in the form of a “dominant conceptual approach” that reflects a convergence of disciplinary perspectives. “It would perhaps be helpful,” he argued, “if scholars curtailed their understandable desire to develop new and encompassing definitions of accountability and rather acknowledged the dormant conceptual consensus and work from there.” (Schillemans, 2013, 27.)

That same year Staffan Lindberg published his effort to “bring order” to the conceptual confusion surrounding accountability by “mapping” its core concept and offering an analytically (and empirically) useful reframing of the “litany of subtypes” that had emerged

⁶ In hindsight, the selection of relevant “disciplines”, as well as the associated choice of journals from which the reviewed references were drawn, may have been too limited and somewhat redundant: public administration, constitutional law, political science, international relations, accounting and business administration, social psychology. Missing are selections from fields that also address issues related to accountability, e.g., moral philosophy, critical accounting, anthropology, ethnomethodology.

over the years.⁷ In the end, however, he essentially comes to the same conclusion as Schillemans: those of us engaged in the empirical study of accountability must come to terms with our inability to solve our fundamental conceptual problem. “Empirical reality has a way of making things complicated.... This makes it hard to discern and disentangle when and where a particular type of accountability relationship is engaged, and then trying to establish the level of accountability produced. That it is not easy does not justify not doing it....” In brief, we need to accept the inherent difficulty of uncovering our core concept and get on with the study of accountability.

Among the more recent efforts to deal with the conceptual issue is Danielle Hanna Rached brilliantly presented project focused on establishing a “minimalist concept of accountability”. Tying her approach to the assumption that accountability involves relationships based on the exercise of power,⁸ her survey of the literature is wide ranging and critical regarding the lack of any analytically clear articulation of the concept. In the process, she extracts certain features that seem basic to existing research. Reducing accountability to its “elementary properties,” she offers a list of eight “co-ordinates”⁹ by which researchers can locate accountability within the reality of power relationships. “The co-ordinates offer a broad picture of how power relation are configured and how power-holders may be constrained and held accountable.” (Rached, 2016, 333.)

While Rached attempted to solve the conceptual problem by reducing accountability to its elemental properties, Ellen Rock took a different approach in her 2020 book, *Measuring Accountability in Public Governance Regimes*. (Rock, 2020, Chapter 1.) After noting a “general agreement” that the contested concept of accountability “refers to a relational

⁷ Lindberg’s paper was originally circulated as a Discussion Paper by the Overseas Development Institute in April 2009. See (Lindberg, 2009)

⁸ Rached’s focus on accountability is an extension of her critical assessment of the Global Administrative Law Project (see (Rached, 2014)) and a foreshadowing of her assessments of the World Health Organization to enhance public perceptions of its accountability (see (Rached and Ventura, 2017); (Onarheim and Rached, 2020)). See also (Rached, 2021).

⁹ “1. Formality, 2. Spatial vectors, 3. Institutionalization, 4. Expertise, 5. Standards (output), 6. Procedure (input), 7. Timing, and 8. Consequences.” (Rached, 2016, 333.)

mechanism that can be analysed within the framework of the questions ‘*who* is accountable to *whom*, *for what*, and *how?*’,” she transforms those into normative questions (e.g., who *should* be held accountable, by whom *should* they be held to account, etc.) in order develop “benchmarks” for each factor. Taking that critical and necessary¹⁰ step, however, directly impacts on the conceptualization of accountability that emerges as a result, for it is clearly tied to a “normative yardstick.” The result, once again, is a conceptual sidestep in order to move the research project forward.

In 2022, Jonathan Fox, director of American University’s *Accountability Research Center*, published a working paper that applied a “keyword unpacking” approach¹¹ to accountability. His effort is somewhat unique in that it extended the search for conceptual clarity beyond instances involving the word accountability. For Fox it was important to explore how the *idea* of accountability was being deployed in rhetorical, political contexts as well as in scholarly works.

The vocabulary of the accountability field communicates ideas about who should govern, how they are supposed to govern, who they are supposed to answer to—and how. These words influence the scope of the thinkable. Since accountability involves power relations, it should be no surprise that ways of communicating these ideas can be contested. But the amorphousness of accountability ideas is less widely recognized. This working paper responds to this lack of conceptual clarity by identifying both differences and overlaps between diverse understandings of accountability ideas – as well as the words used to communicate them. (Fox, 2022, 8.)

Although focused primarily (although not exclusively) on cases and examples drawn from the field of international development, his elaboration of the concept’s use has been appropriately described elsewhere as “exhaustive” – and one might add probably

¹⁰ That is, necessary for what she wishes to accomplish, which is an assessment of how different regimes approach the problems of accountability “gaps”, “deficits”, and “overloads”. (See Rock, 2020, Chapter 2.).

¹¹ See (Cornwall and Eade, 2010; Berenskoetter, 2016; Schnable et al., 2021) } for other applications of this approach.

analytically exhausting. But in the end Fox's "unpacking" exercise did not advance the search for some common conceptual ground. If anything, it made the challenge of unearthing a core conceptualization seem more overwhelming by indicating just how far and wide the concept has travelled.

Most recently, Gregana Dimova, Matthew Flinders and Chris Monaghan undertook what they labelled as an "exercise in conceptual cartography." (Dimora et al., forthcoming) Motivated by the explosive growth of studies generated by the "adjectivization" of accountability (e.g., financial accountability, democratic accountability, algorithmic accountability, etc.) they view their mission in terms of reducing the ever-expanding conceptual chaos in our field. Applying conceptual approaches and terminology related to the groundbreaking work of political scientist Giovanni Sartori, their project is intended

to promote *conceptual travelling* and to restrict *conceptual stretching* while at the same time recognising that the innate messiness of accountability at both the theoretical and empirical level may, at times, demand if not a little *conceptual bending* then, at the very least, some elasticity of thought and thinking. (Dimora et al., forthcoming, p._)

Foregoing any effort to establish a core meaning for accountability, they use a detailed bibliometrics analysis of the existing literature to construct the equivalent of an "conceptual landscape" within which "new forms, types and species of accountability can be acknowledged, positioned and understood." (p._)

The relevance of planning

It would be easy to conclude from this brief survey that the effort to develop a core conceptualization for accountability is either "mission impossible" or a "fool's errand". One the reasons I am attracted to the comparison with the study of planning during it

“golden age” is that the field seemed to be engaged in a similar “search” for many years with mixed results.

On the one hand, were those advocates of planning *sui generis* who were so confident that the subject could be studied and taught that they successfully pushed for the establishment of a distinct “Program of Research and Education in Planning at the University of Chicago”. Supported by Charles Merriam, Louis Wirth, and other notable scholars, over its ten-year existence (1946-1956) the Program was headed by Rexford Tugwell (a key member of FDR’s Brain Trust) and economist/urbanologist Harvey Perloff and during that time it hosted a number of scholars, from James Buchanan to Edward Banfield. Part of its mission was to develop a core curriculum for the education of planners and to offer a graduate program that focused on planning *per se*. Throughout its brief history, the Program reflected a belief that there was, indeed, a core concept of planning that could be taught, applied and researched.¹²

On the other hand, is the story behind a classic work on planning by two young Yale University professors. In 1947, political scientist Robert Dahl and economist Charles Lindblom were each assigned to teach a graduate class on planning in their respective departments. Eventually they decided to merge their two seminars into one, and thus began a collaboration that resulted in the 1953 publication of *Politics, Economics, and Welfare*, a book that (at least in its first edition) carried the subtitle *Planning and Politico-economic Systems Resolved Into Basic Social Processes*. What is notable about the work is that both in the 1953 preface and a short section in the opening chapter devoted to “The Concept of Planning,” the authors stress the fact that they’ve decided to intentionally minimize their use of or reference to the concept of planning. Their reasoning, put simply, was that the concept of planning seemed to get in the way of their study for both analytic and ideological reasons.

¹² The program was ended in 1956 due to a retrenchment at the University which had repercussions for the Program’s financial support. (Perloff, 1957)

My objective in the general project is to see what lessons can be drawn from the history of the planning studies field during its extended time as an über concept.

Speculative Conclusion: Might there be a solution?

The efforts to find a solution to our collective conceptual problem typically ended in frustration and the idea that the only way forward for accountability research was to accept the required “sidestep” and get on with the project at hand. Thus, individually and collectively we seem to have accepted the fact that (1) we are dealing with an unresolvable conceptual problem and (2) the best option is to make the necessary conceptual compromises required for each research undertaking.

And yet there may be a way out of our conceptual dilemma, one that can not only help us “move forward” but might also allow us to revisit and reflect on past studies as well. This different approach not only accepts the conceptual ambiguity that surrounds accountability but integrates the existence of that ambiguity into our research programs and protocols. In this method we accept the view that accountability is what Niklas Luhmann called a “condensed concept”.¹³ For Luhmann, concepts such as accountability emerge from a “semantic reservoir” when and where some phenomenon requires differentiation from other terms. This was the case for accountability as it initially developed as an approach to governance in the context of the Norman effort to impose some semblance of order over the constant turbulence that plagued post-Conquest England.¹⁴ Regarded as an alternative approach to coercion, the application of an embryonic approach the Normans had developed and applied in other conquered areas (e.g, Sicily) was adapted to William the Conqueror’s English holdings. Overtime – and literally through centuries of limited but variable usage – the concept took on a variety of meanings and functions. For Luhmann, the meaning of a concept at any point in time – that

¹³ Much of what follows is drawn from (Andersen, 2011) and (Luhmann, 2022).

¹⁴ See (Dubnick, 1998, 70-72.).

is, its specific actualization in varying contexts – draws on past applications but adds to the concept’s “potentiality” and relevance in the ever-changing semantic reservoir. In that sense, each distinctive actualized application of accountability overtime alters its more general formulations while expanding and extending its potentiality for use in other contexts. In this way what we conceive of as accountability in any researchable instance should be initially treated as a particular actualization of some derivation from the broader concept and its multiple potentialities. What we need to do is to put our particular variation of accountability in focus by engaging in an initial process of conceptual “unpacking” or “de-layering”.

For example, in our study of the Challenger tragedy (Romzek and Dubnick, 1987), Barbara Romzek and I relied on a (now classic) four-fold typology of accountabilities constructed along two dimensions: the degree of control over agency actions and the source of that control (internal or external). From the Luhmannian perspective, the broad acceptance of the resulting accountability types (i.e., political, professional, legal, bureaucratic) depended less on the logic of the two-dimensional scheme and more on the widely accepted understanding of each conceptualization by those who read the article. The forms of accountability “made sense” and therefore were easily accepted, as was the argument we presented about the role that conflicting accountability-based expectations played in the decision to launch. Nevertheless, in hindsight, and informed by a “thicker” version of accountability that would have required an unpacking of each type, the analysis might have taken a different form.

In short, rather than assume that our core concept is elusive or magical, we need to begin with the idea that we are dealing with an extremely substantial concept, one that has developed layers of meaning and complexity over centuries and has only relatively recently emerged as a key concept that warrants the attention of a community of scholars.

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