

Separated by a Common Subject

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The theme of this conference relates to a topic that is drawing a great many people together these days: governance. It is a topic that (as the conference title implies) seems to bridge public and private, a fact that probably makes the rationale for a conference such as this even stronger than might otherwise be the case. Governance has also provided the rationale for other endeavors. I am currently affiliated with an interdisciplinary institute of governance at Queen's, and I noticed similar centres dotting the academic landscape; and the topic of governance keeps popping up on almost every call for papers emerging from a wide range of fields from policy studies and political science to business ethics and information technology.

What makes governance an inviting 'big tent' for so many of us is its obvious ambiguity. In this age of skepticism, we seem to latch onto any common ground that allows us to relate to one another as scholars, and governance is as good a candidate as any since it seems to lack any essential meaning that can divide us.

I happen to disagree with that view, for I think that modern governance does have a common core – an 'essence' if you will that helps connect our many and varied endeavors. For me that essence is found in accountability, and that is really the focus of my talk this morning.

When Ron Hodges invited me to address this gathering, what he had in mind was the specific issue of why there is so little interdisciplinary and cross disciplinary work being done on the subject of accountability. Thinking about that task, I realized that I have been spending more time trying to create disciplinary bridges than I have devoted to understanding what creates the divide. So this proved more of a challenge than I had initially expected.

There are many candidate obstructions and barriers to think about. The most obvious are the disciplines themselves, and it is undeniable that communication across disciplines,

schools and departments is often intermittent and politely deferential at best. Within disciplines we typically stick to our own journals and conferences, rarely exploring the relevant work in other fields. Institutional structures and interdepartmental politics at our universities reinforce our myopia, as do the growing demands of the very accountability systems we all study. And to the extent that we believe disciplines reflect distinct paradigms, one can talk about the incommensurability of our intellectual frames and languages.

Another important factor has been the rather strange and fascinating nature of our subject matter. Just as a common language seems to divide we Americans from you Brits, so our common subject, accountability, may be the most significant barrier to the interdisciplinary work and cross-disciplinary communication that would benefit us all.

Part of the problem is that the term accountability is taken for granted by those of us raised in the Anglo-American systems. Back in 1994, I learned the hard way that the term is truly Anglican in origin and, until recently, in use. When I was scheduled to give a lecture that year at the University of Goias in Brazil, I was informed on my way to the lecture hall that they had to modify the title of my talk from "accountability and political responsibility in emerging democracies" to just "political responsibility in emerging democracies" because the word accountability that not exist in Portuguese. In fact, the term for accountability in Portuguese was (at least at that time) *responsabilidade* -- the same word applied to the term responsibility. Since my talk was based on the difference in relationship between accountability and responsibility, it required that I make some significant adjustments to my talk at the very last moment, and I have always been grateful to the simultaneous translator who had to make sense of my stumbling comments.

What I discovered, however, was that none of the Romance languages, and few of the other major languages, had a term that conceptually fit with our idea of accountability. The hegemony of the Anglo-American economic and legal systems in our increasingly globalized world has changed the situation significantly. Just as Japan had adopted a transliteration of accountability when it first expose itself to British and American commerce in the late 19th century, so other nations (including Brazil) have recently formally adopted it as a legal "term of art" necessary for those engaged in our WTO-dominated world.

But while the transnational legal community has seemingly come to terms with the idea of accountability, the rest of us are left to deal with how the term is used in the broader contexts of governance, management, and indeed everyday life.

The most fundamental problem I believe is conceptual.

Conceptually, accountability suffers from its "family resemblance" to a wide range of similarly ambiguous terms. In that sense, it is a classic example of Wittgenstein's observation that words-as-concepts are not effectively definable outside the context of the language game in which they are being put to use. To the extent that the game is based

on rather loose rules of play and engagement, a concept such as accountability can and does remain rather fuzzy. In these contexts, synonymic behavior abounds. Other terms that resemble accountability, such as responsibility, obligation, answerability, liability, etc., can easily be put in play depending on the player’s needs as well as the context of the game (see exhibit). When the rules are tighter, the game may demand greater specificity and less fuzziness, as was the case with the Brazilian legal community. It was no longer convenient to avoid developing a term of a legal art for accountability.

<i>Accountability: Family Resemblances</i>				
<i>Contexts</i>	<i>Legal Setting</i>	<i>Organizational Setting</i>	<i>Professional Setting</i>	<i>Political Setting</i>
Moral Pulls	<i>Liability</i>	<i>Answerability</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	<i>Responsiveness</i>
Moral Pushes	<i>Obligation</i>	<i>Obedience</i>	<i>Fidelity</i>	<i>Amenability</i>

Adapted from (Dubnick 1998)

To see how this impacts on our problem of interdisciplinary research in accountability, consider the various ways that disciplinary context subtly but significantly impacts on our approach to the topic. In accounting, as Peter Miller and others have noted, accountability implies calculability, while in law it signifies liability and in politics it reflects the need for responsiveness. For sociologists, accountability is associated with excuse making and the justification of socially questionable behavior, while social psychologists study it as a narrowly defined form of answerability within interpersonal relationships.

The epistemological distinctions posited by Habermas are also relevant here. Even within disciplinary boundaries there are those who approach accountability as a technical issue, while others perceive it from an interpretive stance and still others take a critical approach. Complicating and enriching all this has been the recent movement toward expanding what we mean by “governing”. While there is still a great deal to learn and understand about the accountability mechanisms found within the formal structures of government, we are now seeing a great deal more attention being paid to accountability within network-dominated “governance” relationships, as well the role that the logic of accountabilities play in the governmentality that seems to underlie collective action.

		Epistemology:		
		Positivistic	Interpretive	Critical
Focus on:	Government			
	Governance			
	Governmentality			

These distinctions are reinforced and highlighted by the different paradigms driving each of our disciplines, and creating the situation that Thomas Kuhn described as

"incommensurability". Given all this, it is somewhat surprising that we communicate with each other at all.

And, had circumstances not changed over the past 25 years, it would not matter a great deal whether we communicated across disciplinary boundaries. Accountability has proven to be important and meaningful in different ways in a variety of contexts. But in recent years a number of significant social and political developments have made our continued disciplinary isolation untenable.

Among these developments, perhaps the most potent has been the growing sense that there is a broadly defined "crisis of trust" among the public -- a crisis that has little basis in fact, but has nevertheless generated a massive call for what Onora O'Neill has term a "new accountability" that pervades almost every aspect of our collective lives. This new accountability is not only pervasive in a sense of calling to account almost every service-providing profession, but it is also accountability with "quite sharp teeth."

In the private sector and among the professions, the new accountability has breathed new life into the "regulatory state". In United States, at least, the regulatory state went through a transformation in the 1970s and 1980s that resulted in a deregulation of the economy and the extension of audit-based regulatory oversight to a wide range of service providers. In the public sector, this trend manifested itself in what is now broadly defined as the "new public management" (NPM). What characterizes both is the belief that performance and service in general would be improved and enhanced through greater accountability.

Complementing the crisis of trust has been an often cited "democratic deficit" that implies a lack of transparency, inclusion, and participation of stakeholders and the general public in decisions that impact on their lines. Here too, accountability would play a significant role.

Through these and related developments, accountability has emerged as an iconic term, as suitable for use in political rhetoric at in the technical jargon of accounting and management. Accountable governance is good governance, implying that bad or poor performance must be subjected to accountability. As significant, accountability is now a promiscuous term, carrying with it the implied promises of democracy, justice, more ethical behavior, and better performance.

All this has made the interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary study of accountability both more urgent and more difficult than ever before.

So we come to the central question: What can be done to foster the kind of interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary work that is needed? One word might cover it all: venues. We need places -- virtual and real -- to meet and intellectually interact. We need conferences, symposia and issues of major journals, perhaps even a journal of our own that will consider any scholarly work dealing with accountability. We need research institutes and centres, which also means we require funding sources and the networks that

support them. We need online lists and weblogs where news, ideas, and queries can be posted.

I would also argue that what we do not need are more grand efforts focused on narrowing the subject by discovering THE definition of accountability or the development or imposition of some paradigm or theoretical frame. If anything we need just the opposite - that is, we need to provide opportunities for alternative perspectives and research agendas to flourish. But this should all be accomplished within common venues – in short, within a community of scholars committed to sustaining research on accountability despite the common subject that divides us.

But alas I am singing to the choir, for among all the disciplines whose work I have surveyed, it is accounting -- and especially the critical school of accounting scholarship in the UK, that sets the standard for those of us engaged in other disciplinary games. Coming from the more myopic world of American political science and public administration, I cannot help but be impressed and energized by the depth and breadth of the work on accountability you've offered the rest of us, and the interaction with other disciplines through ESRC seminars and other forums needs emulation.

We are trying to do our bit in this effort by convening an international research colloquium on accountable governance at Queen's University Belfast next October. We hope to gather together at least 100 accountability researchers from around the world who represent a wide range of disciplines and approaches to issues of accountability. What we hope to provide is the kind of venue that will both facilitate communication within and across the disciplinary boundaries that has characterized accountability-focused research thus far. Our purpose is not to overcome the differences that separate us, but to foster an awareness and appreciation of the complex and fuzzy subject that brings us together. I hope that members of this wonderful choir will be able to join us.

Dubnick, Mel. 1998. Clarifying Accountability: An Ethical Theory Framework. In PUBLIC SECTOR ETHICS: FINDING AND IMPLEMENTING VALUES, edited by N. P. Charles Sampford, with C-A Bois. Leichhardt, NSW, Australia: The Federation Press/Routledge: Chapter 5, 68-81.