



PART VII

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REFLECTIONS ON
THE FUTURE OF
ACCOUNTABILITY
STUDIES

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CHAPTER 40

THE ONTOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

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THE CASE FOR ACCOUNTABILITY STUDIES

In an earlier chapter in this volume I put forward the case for viewing accountability as a cultural keyword. In highlighting its importance as a rhetorical device in the hands of politicians and valued policy tool in those of reformers, that presentation implied that accountability might be nothing more than a cultural artifact of modern society, more significant as an iconic driver of our collective aspirations than as an effective aspect of dealing with the problems of governance. Implied as well was a strong critique of the basic assumptions (i.e., the promises inherent in the different reformist discourses) used to justify the development and use of accountability mechanisms as a means to measure and modify the performance of government.

The theme of this short commentary might seem to run counter to the focus and tone of that earlier analysis, for here I will make the case for the development of a field of “accountability studies” designed to extend and deepen our understanding of its actual role in governance. To put the case in the strongest possible terms, I contend that *it is not possible to comprehend the role of governance in human relationships (past and present) without a basic understanding and appreciation of accountability*. In that sense, the future of governance studies depends on the development of an organized field dedicated to the study of accountability.

OPTION-I AND OPTION-R

The main challenge for the field of accountability studies is to deal with a formidable ontological dilemma, for there are two clear paths the field might follow. Each path



involves a defining ontological viewpoint about the social phenomena that comes under the purview of studying accountability. The first option, which I will refer to as Option-I, perceives accountability institutionally, as part of that assemblage of structures and mechanisms that comprise governance. The second (referenced below as Option-R) assumes a relational view of accountability, positing that account-giving behavior is a basic form of human interaction capable of (and often) existing independently of governance arrangements or any other institutional context. These alternative ontologies offer radically different answers to the key question of any research endeavor: what is it we are studying?

A case can be made against this two-options model of the field, for on the surface the two views are not mutually exclusive. The obvious overlap is found in the fact that all institutionalized forms of accountability are comprised of structures and processes (i.e., accountability mechanisms) designed to establish and foster account-giving relationships and associated behavior that serve the purposes of organization (see Aucoin and Heintzman 2000). The problem is that once institutionalized, the account-giving relationship is more often than not transformed into something quite different, e.g., a bureaucratic procedure requiring regular reports or audits, the establishment of a standard for assessing performance, etc.¹ Once a relationship becomes structured, formalized and/or mechanized, the social dynamic that underpins account-giving relations and behaviors is altered. From the perspective of Option-R, accountability mechanisms are at least one order removed from the behaviors involved in accountability-based interactions, and can best be understood as surrogates for account-giving relationships.²

The governance-related literature currently associated with accountability addresses the distinction between the two ontological options whenever confronting the need to define the concept. In some instances the dilemma is resolved by equating accountability with the surrogate mechanisms themselves. Thus, the degree of agency “transparency” (i.e., openness and disclosure) is often cited as a direct measure of accountability (Hale 2008)³, just as audits and associated reporting and compliance requirements are equated with accountability (Guthrie 1993; Power 1999). In other studies there is a passing acknowledgement of the relational nature of accountability (typically as a principal-agent relationship; see Przeworski et al. 1999), followed by the adoption of an Option-I definition (“for present purposes”) that focuses the study’s attention on the mechanisms rather than the relationships underlying them.

In contrast, there exists a considerable body of work outside the realm of governance-related scholarship based on the Option-R ontology. For example, the giving and demanding of accounts has been addressed by sociologists and social psychologists who have generated many studies focusing on excuse-making, the attribution of blame and reactions to demands to explain one’s actions or decisions (e.g., Scott and Lyman 1968; Tetlock et al. 2007). The study of speech acts initiated by analytic philosophers and applied linguists is also relevant (Searle 1969; Smith 2008; Buttny 1993), as is the work of cognitive psychologists who explore the creation of self-identity in individual efforts to relate to others (Bandura 2001). Much of the work on the role ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and folk psychology (Dennett 1987; Churchland 1989) play

in everyday life relates to account-giving behaviors, and there have been efforts among computer scientists to integrate those notions of accountable relationships into their work (see Eriksén 2002). As significant is the contemporary focus among moral philosophers on “what we owe each other” (Scanlon 1998) and the moral identity formed by “giving an account of oneself” to others (Butler 2005).

In addition, within the field of public administration itself there are relevant Option-R case studies that can be brought to the accountability studies endeavor. Among the classics in the field, Herbert Kaufman’s study of the US Forest Service (1967) can be reconsidered as an examination of the range of methods used to hold widely dispersed members of the US Forest Service accountable to the priorities of the agency. The work of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) and others who study the everyday lives and dilemmas of public servants can similarly be put to use in a strong research program focused on account-giving relationships and behavior.

And there is clear evidence that such a research program is already underway. Hupe and Hill (2007) have already conducted a reanalysis of Michael Lipsky’s 1980 examination of street-level bureaucracies based on the relational nature of public accountability. Lily L. Tsai (2007) has published an in depth study of the role that “informal accountability” has played in the delivery of public services in rural China, and in the US Barbara Romzek and colleagues have undertaken research to uncover the role that informal accountability relationships play in the complex world of service delivery networks (Romzek, LaRoux, and Blackmar 2012). These and similar studies are indicative of a trend driven in large part by an awareness that there is more to accountability and its role in governance than has been explored under the previously dominant Option-I perspective.

While there seems to be something of a convergence of the two ontological options emerging from these studies of informal governance mechanisms, perhaps the most significant developments may be in the efforts of Mark Bovens (2005) and Mark Philp (2009) in constructing a conceptual-theoretical bridge between the two ontologies. Going beyond mere acknowledgment of the relational nature of accountability, each demonstrates that applying what is known about account-giving relations and behavior enhances our understanding of governance and provides insights into why efforts to improve the operations and performance of governments have proven so frustrating and puzzling.

A RADICAL SHIFT TOWARD OPTION-R

While the Bovens/Philps efforts to bridge the ontological options advances the case (and rationale) for the field of accountability studies, my own approach would involve a more radical shift toward the Option-R position. Central to my argument is the contention that account-giving relationships and associated behaviors form the foundations of governance. Put otherwise, account-giving relations comprise the constitutive elements of any arrangement of the structures and process that produce and sustain governance.

This commentary is obviously not the appropriate venue for elaborating the logic and rationale for advocating such a radical ontological shift, but the implications for the study of accountable governance can be considerable. Empirically, Option-R uses account-giving relationships as the basic unit of analysis rather than institutional arrangements and mechanisms.⁴ Methodologically, it gives priority to ethnography over design—i.e., critical, descriptive and explanatory studies over evaluative and prescriptive efforts. Theoretically, it loosens the strong ties of accountability studies to the logic of neo-institutional and positive theory (see Scott 2008; Suddaby 2010) and reasserts its long-established links to moral philosophy (Smith 1759) and the reemergence of relational social theory (e.g., Archer 2007).

Since the current thread of research on accountability was initiated more than twenty-five years ago (Day and Klein 1987; Romzek and Dubnick 1987), there have been times when one felt the need to make an open plea for greater attention to the complex nature of this critical subject (e.g., Dubnick 2002). Over the past decade (at least) those pleas have been answered. The question now is how we move the field of accountability studies forward.

NOTES

1. See Levin (1974, 364), where a survey of the literature generates four “relatively distinct concepts of accountability: (a) as performance reporting; (b) as a technical process; (c) as a political process; (d) as an institutional process.”
2. The same holds true for trust relations; see Harré (1999).
3. Transparency is often perceived as the equivalence of accountability in the policy area as well; see Krotoszynski (2011).
4. A shift equivalent in nature and purpose to Simon’s (1947) call for establishing decision-making and decision premises as the basic unit of analysis for the administrative sciences.

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