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Move Over Daniel: We Need Some "Accountability Space"

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Editor's Note:

The July issue of A&S contained a provocative contribution from Dr. Matthew Flinders of University of Sheffield, U.K. titled "Daring to be a Daniel: The Pathology of Politicized Accountability in a Monitory Democracy ", in which he challenged readers to "Dare to Be Daniels" by going beyond the conventional wisdom concerning accountability in public administration. He provoked the responses below from Dr. Philip E. Tetlock of the University of Pennsylvania and Dr. Melvin J. Dubnick of the University of New Hampshire. Readers who wish to respond to these stimulating provocations should take pen in hand at their earliest convenience.

Abstract

Professor Flinders makes a strong case that our obsession with accountability has turned "problematic" and even "pathological". While agreeing with the gist of the argument, I contend that the essence of the problem is more ontological than political. What we require is a radical "reframing" that highlights the pervasive role accountability relationships play in governance—that is, an approach that would shift attention to the alteration of ongoing governance arrangements and relationships that occurs with each reformist effort to "enhance" or "improve" accountability. Governance takes place within accountability spaces, and we need to give priority to research that maps that space as a first step toward understanding the nature and potential of accountable governance.

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It is difficult to "dispute" the spot-on observations of Professor Flinders. They reinforce the equally articulate remarks that Baroness Onora O'Neill made in her 2002 BBC Reith Lectures that brought into question the "quest" for greater accountability that was, she argued, undermining the sense of trust in government and society.[1] Both raise issues about the wisdom of our current collective obsession with accountability, and if there is a difference between them, it comes down to the focus of their concerns. For Flinders, it is public support for government that has been damaged, whereas O'Neill regards the impact as broader and more pervasive, with accountability undermining social trust in general. Both effectively make the case that we get more than we bargain for when seeking greater accountability.

If I have a disagreement with Professor Flinders' presentation of the issues raised by our collective obsession with accountability, it is that he does not go far enough in providing us with an understanding of the nature of the problems and challenges it poses for us as scholars and policy makers. The perspective he offers is insightful within the current discourse established both among students of accountable governance and those who explicitly advocate or implicitly favor its enhancement and extension throughout society in general and governance in particular. But I argue later in the article that discourse has its limitations and biases. It is rooted in a reformist narrative that drives the current obsession with so-called accountability solutions to a wide range of problems for which they are not suited. Nothing short of a break with that discourse and its associated assumptions will put our "accountability" problems in proper perspective.

To make my point, I would posit a counterargument to the general one offered by Professor Flinders: It is not accountability that is undermining our aspirations for an effective democracy but the reformist aspiration for an effective democracy that is undermining accountability.

At the outset, let me reassure you that I am not about to argue against democracy—aspirational or otherwise. Nor am I about to argue for or against any other form of governance being advocated by those who are to some degree committed to a particular view of what constitutes "good" or "appropriate" governance. What I am asserting is the primacy of accountability in governance, no matter what its form.

I am not offering an argument against reformist agendas per se, although I am perhaps more skeptical than many of my colleagues about the value and worthiness of many proposals for change. Rather, I will make the case for a

more cautious approach to accountability-based reforms based on the existence of what I will call the "reformist paradox." Simply stated, this paradox holds that any effort to improve accountability through reforms generates consequences that in fact alters and often undermines existing forms of accountability already in place.

Move over, Daniel, I am about to offer the lion something else to chew on for a bit.

"There is No There There"

Allow me to initiate my counterargument with a bit of intellectual autobiography. Over the past 25+ years of studying accountability, I have found the problematic nature of the subject annoyingly intractable. Initially, it seemed that the problem was analytic and methodological. Here was a topic that was steeped in our everyday discourse about government and that (as Romzek and I attempted to demonstrate with the 1987 Challenger article in *Public Administration Review* [*PAR*]; Romzek & Dubnick, 1987) can be framed and applied through case studies in an analytically useful way.

Getting beyond the case study approach, however, has proven difficult when attempting to make more sense of accountability and its role in governance. It proved to be more easily understood than operationalized. Central to the *PAR* article, and the work that followed with Professor Romzek (especially a 1991 introductory public administration textbook and 1993 chapter in a volume devoted to public administration [PA] research), was the idea that accountability involved the management of expectations in a setting where there were multiple, diverse, and often conflicting expectations (compare Day & Klein, 1987). Still, even as the "Challenger framework" gained wider acceptance and use, attempts to gain more insight through systematic research (at least among PA scholars) were limited and typically based on the examination of specific cases (e.g., Johnston & Romzek, 1999, 2000; Kim, 2005; Kim & Lee, 2010; Romzek & Ingraham, 2000).

Digging deeper into the analytic issue, it became evident to me that the problem was really more conceptual—that the term itself lacked a meaningful and stable foundation on which we could establish its analytic credibility. Sinclair (1995) puts the problem in terms of the "chameleon-like" nature of accountability, a view she supported with a brilliant study of how different public agency heads subjectively constructed and enacted varying meanings for accountability. Mulgan's (2000) survey of the conceptual landscape observed that the concept was ever expanding and thus constantly changing, whereas I attempted to focus on the problems posed by accountability's synonymic—and increasingly iconic—existence (Dubnick, 2002). In lieu of some consensus about what accountability means, those seeking to actually

"study" accountable behavior had to adapt. The only resolution was to engage in some form of methodological reductionism by narrowing the focus to the level of individual behavior (e.g., "felt" accountability) and/or assuming a more specific definition (e.g., accountability is answerability, accountability is responsiveness, etc.). These reductive approaches characterized the work of a growing number of social psychologists (with Philip Tetlock[2] leading the way) who tackled the elusive subject at the individual level. Students of governance, however, took refuge in still more case studies.

In recent years, as accountability has emerged as "the word that is eating government"(Dubnick & Frederickson, 2011c, p. 4), some of us have turned our attention to the need for a theory of accountable governance that would get us beyond the analytic and conceptual problems of the past while providing a more general framework for resolving both (e.g., Yang, 2011). My own critical examination of the rhetoric surrounding accountability (e.g., Dubnick, 2005)—both in academe and among advocates for reform—leads to one conclusion: "there is no there there."[3] Instead of theories that can be articulated and put to test, we find empty (and theoretically vacuous) "promises" of what great accountability can achieve.[4] Are you a manager seeking greater control over agency operations? Try making your workers more accountable. Want politicians and administrators to adhere to a code of ethics? Make them more accountable. Want to get better performance and productivity from teachers or doctors or other professional? Try applying some high-stakes accountability techniques and "measures." Want government to be more responsive to the people? Make those who govern more accountable. Behind the mantra of promises, however, are nothing more than strong beliefs that stand little chance of withstanding logical (let alone empirical) scrutiny.

Nihilism is Not an Option

What is to be done in the face of hollow theories based on ambiguous concepts? Intellectual nihilism is not an option when it comes to a concept such as accountability that plays such a dominant role in our contemporary "governmentality." It is difficult—no, impossible is better way to put it—to ignore accountability when it is cited as both the cause *and* cure for every ailment and imperfection in government and among those who govern (whether in public, private, or "third sector" contexts).

This brings me to my current view of the accountability problem and the conclusion that what we are dealing with is an ontological issue from which all the other problems—analytic, conceptual, and theoretical—flow. Perhaps the problem is the way we view accountability and the role it plays in our governance universe.

In the ontology of mainstream governance studies, accountability takes three basic forms: institutional configurations (e.g., constitutional configurations involving checks and balances), mechanisms (e.g., reports, inspections, performance measurement), and processes (e.g., investigations of mishaps, imposing of sanctions). This is a reality in which accountability is an instrument of management and reform, where account-giving is perceived as a motivational tool in the hands of authority figures or as a means for change agents to help achieve our collective aspirations for a truer form of democracy, less corruption, and "good governance."

This is the ontological world in which most of us, as students of governance, operate. It is the assumed reality that informs commentaries like those of Professor Flinders—and (I contend), it is a reality that blinds us to an even more significant place for accountability in our lives, both political and social.

The "alternative reality," I would argue for, is not one in which accountability relationships (as institutions, mechanisms, and processes) play a secondary or corrective role in governance, but rather where they (i.e., account-demanding and account-giving relationships) constitute the very essence of social arrangements that comprise governance.

Among those engaged in the study of ontology, there are two major positions related to how we approach social reality. On one side is the tradition of the substantialists who wish to deal with the world as we see and understand it—the empirical, observable world of objects and beings that we classify, categorize, and operationalize in language and methods that effectively construct a describable, measurable, and manageable world (see Searle, 1995). At the other extreme are the relationalists who are willing to accept such constructs as manifestations of the relationships, interactions, and contexts that generate them (see Bourdieu, 1985; Emirbayer, 1997). For them, social reality is the invisible (nonsubstantive) properties of underlying conditions that give form, shape, direction, and definition to those surface constructs that we study.[5]

For students of accountable governance, the substantialist perspective highlights those actions and structures that match the discourse about institutions, mechanisms, and processes. Accountability of this sort demands answers to the questions of "for what?" and "to whom?" for it is viewed as a distinct structural form in human relations, subject to management and manipulation as an instrumental construct within a broader (e.g., organizational, legal, political) context.

In contrast, a relationalist view brings to the foreground the role of accountability as a critical ingredient in the building and maintenance of the social order within which structures (i.e., institutions, mechanisms, and processes) operate. In this capacity, accountability relationships are perceived as more than mere contexts or settings. They are, in fact, the media through

which human interactions are transformed into the raw material that comprise governance arrangements. Conceptually, from a relationalist perspective, accountability constitutes what sociologists and social geographers would call a "social space"[6]—a milieu of account-giving and account-demanding human relationships that constitute what, for our purposes, would be more appropriately "accountability space." In its more contemporary forms, the accountability space ontology does show up in the work of social psychologists and sociologists but is effectively ignored by the more substantialist-oriented governance studies field.

What difference would a shift in ontological position make for those studying accountable governance? Consider the following alternative narratives addressing the role of accountability in governance and the implications of each for how we view accountability-based reforms.

The Substantialist Narrative

In the substantialist reality of the not too distant past, the call for accountability takes two major forms: post factum and pre factum (see Dubnick & Frederickson, 2011b). *Post factum accountability* came into play after some event occurred that we believed required attribution. The event itself might have ranged from the trivial faux pas (e.g., the failure to report a minor bookkeeping error) to the unfathomably tragic or catastrophic (e.g., the Challenger accident, genocidal acts). Driven by a logic that assumed any such event must involve some degree of nonfeasance (i.e., thoughtlessness or negligence), misfeasance, or malfeasance, post factum accountability was instituted to bring culpable parties to account for these events. This effort may have risen to the level of seeking justice, but in most instances, it was a matter of seeking explanations, finding fault, looking for reasons, and demanding excuses and possibily apologies.

On a functional level, *pre factum accountability* was initially regarded as actions that preclude the need for (or mitigate the costs and consequences of) post factum account-giving. The very notion of "keeping accounts" and generating reports were reflections of the traditional pre factum form, as were conflict of interest laws, codes of ethics, and the innumerable other requirements designed to control and check the behavior of agents. One can argue that the historical emergence of modern bureaucratic organizations was a result of the accretion and institutionalization of pre factum accountability. Similarly, we can consider "red tape" as the residue left by such mechanisms once the rationale for their existence has been forgotten.

Within this substantialist narrative, accountability was perceived as a social artifact—an instrument or tool we designed and applied in those situations

where some untoward event has occurred (in re post factum) or some desirable state of affairs required some protection from the possibility of such an event.[7]

In recent years, however, this substantialist narrative has been altered by a slow but consequential decoupling of the post- and pre factum rationales for accountability. What has emerged in its place is a strong belief in the power of accountability—that is, a belief in the "promises" of accountability that have become part and parcel of the reformist rhetoric that regards pre factum accountability as the key to what is generally termed *good governance* and its goals of greater efficiency, improved performance, and enhanced democracy.

This is the narrative that has driven and continues to drive the ever-expanding reach of those reformers whose belief in the promises of accountability is so strong that it often borders on a fundamentalist faith that is intolerant of skeptics.[8] These true believers have pushed their agenda into every nook and cranny of government, especially through the high-stakes performance measurement regimes that have been fed by the widespread antigovernment attitudes of the general public. Unfortunately, for those of us who study accountable governance, it is the "promises of accountability" narratives constructed on the foundation of the substantialist reality that has undermined a more critical research agenda. In that respect, it is fortunate that we have scholars such as Professors Flinders and O'Neill willing to put themselves in the lions' den.

That said, there is more than a strong hint of the "promises" narrative in Professor Flinders' argument, and in that regard, I do not feel he goes far enough in his challenge to both scholars and policy makers. For him, the problem comes down to "too much" accountability. Rather than challenge the very notions that underlie the reformist pursuit of the empty and unsubstantiated promises of accountability, what he brings into question are the excessive demands of the reformers. Effective democracy, he assumes, can in fact result from an appropriate amount of change through accountability. What this amounts to is a strongly qualified endorsement of the reformist ideology. For accountability researchers, the implications are clearly stated: We have an obligation to challenge those "self-evident truths" and the dominant conventional wisdom. Each and every premise underlying the reformist agenda poses an empirical question that demands our attention. But is that sufficient? Are we not still allowing the reformists to set the agenda by accepting the underlying substantialist narrative?

A Relationalist Narrative

It should be obvious by now that I believe that to be the case. Moreover, I think there is an alternative narrative found in the relationalist ontology that

can allow us to deal with the major issues of accountable governance without buying into the reformist mind-set.

The relationalist narrative starts with the assumption that all governance is comprised of established, ongoing, and emergent social relationships that comprise an "accountability space." This seemingly radical "spatial" vision of accountability can be traced back to at least Adam Smith (1759) who (despite distortions and caricatures to the contrary[9]) posits the view that all moral (i.e., social) relationships are rooted in accountability. "A moral being is an accountable being," he wrote in first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Part III, chap. 1),[10] a point he builds and elaborates on throughout the volume and later editions. Here is a relevant passage from the last edition:

> Our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people; and we are all very forward to observe how each of these affects us. But we soon learn, that other people are equally frank with regard to our own. We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear those agreeable or disagreeable creatures which they represent us. We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them, by considering how they would appear to us if in their situation. We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking–glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct. If in this view it pleases us, we are tolerably satisfied. We can be more indifferent about the applause, and, in some measure, despise the censure of the world secure that, however misunderstood or misrepresented, we are the natural and proper objects of approbation. On the contrary, if we are doubtful about it, we are often, upon that very account, more anxious to gain their approbation, and, provided we have not already, as they say, shaken hands with infamy, we are altogether distracted at the thoughts of their censure, which then strikes us with double severity. (Smith, 1790/1976, Part III, chap. 1)

According to Smith, we are not rational beings but accountable beings, driven by empathic "fellow-feelings" and sentiments. Taken forward two centuries, contemporary analysts speak to the social construction of accountability (Sinclair, 1995), how we operate in the world through the "lens" of accountability (Hall, Bowen, Ferris, Royle, & Fitzgibbons, 2007), and the important role that "felt" and "affective" accountability plays in our daily lives (Faircloth, 2011; Hochwarter, Perrewé, Hall, & Ferris, 2005).

For the relationalist, the traditional post factum/pre factum narrative can still prove useful in understanding how and why a specific set of accountability institutions, mechanisms, and processes emerge and change over time. In that sense, it provides a fertile framework for the development and testing of theories related to accountable governance, qualified by the fact that the entire process is embedded in a dynamic accountability space for which "*ceteris paribus*" controls must be explicitly applied.

But the relationalist perspective would be less kind to research driven by the reformist agenda. Enhanced accountability, regardless of intent, involves more than positive change. It involves a disruption and alteration of existing and ongoing accountability relationships—both the visible institutions, mechanisms, and processes of accountability and the invisible accountability relationships that define and direct our interaction with others. Reforms designed to make individual actors or agencies more accountable do not fill a vacuum but become part of the accountability space into which they are inserted.

Central to applying the relationalist narrative to studies of accountability reform would be the "reformist paradox," which is implied in Professor Flinders' critique: Any effort to enhance accountability also alters accountability. It is in that sense that I posit the counter to his argument, for while there is a problem with the obsession to spread and implement the gospel of accountability's promises, it is the threat such reforms pose to existing forms of accountability relationships that needs to be taken into consideration. The effectiveness of government and the basic conditions of social trust ought not be arbitrarily undermined due to the blindness imposed by the reformist agendas. There may be need to bring about changes in the existing accountability space, but these require knowledge about current terrain of accountable governance.

In other words, there is no need to take reform off the table. Studies of accountability reform (whether to test their viability or assess their impact) must, however, take the reformist paradox into account, and this would require at the outset an examination or "mapping" of the relevant accountability space.[11] Such studies ought to be given high priority to establish both a better understanding of the accountability regimes through which we govern and a foundation for truly effective change.

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Notes

1. Audio files of O'Neill's lectures can be accessed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00ghvd8/episodes/player (they are listed in reverse order of the original presentations). For the published version of her remarks, see O'Neill (2002).
2. Tetlock's (1980, 1981, 1983) work on accountability can be dated back to his work on "self-presentation" in the early 1980s. See Lerner and Tetlock (1999) for an overview of the research to that point. For his latest work, see Tetlock and Mellers (2011).
3. Now widely used, the phrase is drawn from comments made by Gertrude Stein about Oakland, California, where she spent most of her childhood.
4. For an overview of the "promises" perspective, see Dubnick and Frederickson (2011a, pp. xviii-xxi) and also Dubnick and Yang (2011).
5. Consider, for example, the concept of money, an almost universal construct that we deal with daily as if it had real existence in the form of currency or digitized value posted in an account. For the substantialist, money in its empirical form and its circulation is a sufficient basis for examining the social reality of economic relations and the market as an institution. For the relationalist, however, the existence of the construct money is itself a social reality that requires examination.
6. See Buttimer (1969) for an intellectual history of the "social space" ontology in social geography. Schatzki (1991) provides a more philosophical rationale for the perspective, relying heavily on the work of Heidegger. For a more "pragmatic" view of social space, see Lussault and Stock (2009).
7. Perhaps there is no better example than what takes place immediately following an airplane crash. The event triggers a post factum process of investigations by agencies established for just that purpose. Those investigations generate reports that focus on pinpointing the cause, whether it be some technical flaw, natural cause, or human error. These reports may suggest immediate actions to solve the problem or to impose sanctions where necessary, but more important in the long term are the recommendation for adjustments in the pre factum conditions, including establishing arrangements for accountability mechanisms that will assure implementation and compliance.
8. A case in point is the harsh criticism received by education policy historian Diane Ravitch who raised serious questions about the value of high-stakes accountability reforms in American education. Originally an advocate for such reforms, her

very public and active criticisms generated harsh reactions (some of it personal) from government officials, powerful advocates of reform (e.g., Bill Gates), and members of the media. For her views on No Child Left Behind and related initiatives, see Ravitch (2010).

9. Among the pantheon of western philosophers, few have been treated as poorly as Smith whose high status as the father of modern economics and capitalism has come at a considerable cost to his real contributions to moral and social theory. His social philosophy is so distorted that many regarded it as a "lost legacy," and to regard him as some sort of Ayn Randian moral egoist or libertarian based solely on bits and pieces of *The Wealth of Nations* is to read him completely out of context.
10. That specific phrasing varies over the next five editions of the book but does not appear at all in the sixth edition. See Dubnick (2010) for some conjectures as to why this is the case.
11. In what might prove to be a model for mapping accountability spaces, a team of researchers headed by Barbara Romzek and Jocelyn Johnston have taken on the task of examining what they call the "informal accountability" of social service delivery networks. See Romzek et al. (2011).

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Bio

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