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Innocence, Blame and Accountability:
Avoidance and Sensemaking in Public Administration

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Introduction
Public Administration in the United States has a foundational value in something called “accountability.” Increased accountability is assumed to lead to increased efficiency and effectiveness in government. Both elected officials and public managers are said to be accountable for their actions. This concept of accountability is embedded in an understanding of individual actions and linear cause and effect. We make sense of such a world through assigning cause, credit or blame to individuals for outward events. This paper attempts to unpack the concept of accountability. I survey various approaches to accountability, explore its function, and identify various accountability mechanisms. Finally, I identify some of the assumptions implicit in the concept and consider the results of such assumptions and usage.

Definitions of Accountability
A great deal of literature has been devoted to accountability along with numerous definitions. Accountability often refers to an implicit or explicit expectation that one may be called on to justify one's beliefs, feelings, and actions to others (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Semin & Manstead, 1983; Tetlock, 1992). Accountability also usually implies that people who do not provide a satisfactory justification for their actions will suffer negative consequences, ranging from disdainful looks to loss of one's livelihood, liberty, or even life (Stenning, 1995). It also often contains the idea that certain individuals have a duty to report on, explain and justify to others actions they have taken or decisions they have made (Vagg, 1994).

Crane and Matten (2004, p. 55), define organizational accountability as the readiness or preparedness of an organization to give an explanation and a justification to relevant stakeholders for its judgments, intentions, acts, and omissions when appropriately called upon to do so. Rubin (2005) defines accountability as the ability of one actor to demand an explanation or justification of another actor for its actions and to reward or punish that second actor on the basis of its performance or its explanation. Dubnick (2003) divides accountability into answerability, blameworthiness, liability and attributability. Robert
Merton (1968) takes a sociological rather than an institutional view of accountability, labeling it “situated pressures for account giving behavior.”

The various definitions focus first on a mechanism requiring a person or organization to explain, report or give an account of their actions to specified people. A second element sometimes included is liability. Consequences for the accountable person or organization may result from their report.

**Approaches to the study of Accountability**

The construct “accountability” is located within a family of concepts, all having to do with an “account,” report or story. The relational nature of the concept is also implicit. Accountability, accounting or an account is not a solo enterprise. It cannot be undertaken by an individual. It is an interactive relationship among entities. The reporter or story teller may be called the *accountee* and the recipient of the story may be called the *accounter*. The accountee may be an individual, group or organization. The accounter might be a person, an organization, a government, a society or even a deity. The account concerns some activity or activities of the accountee. Finally, there is an explicit power differential between accounter and accountee obligating the one to provide an account to the other. The justification is that the activities undertaken by the accountee are understood to be in some way owned by the accounter.

Studies of accountability tend to be framed from the perspective of either the *accounter* or *accountee*. Studies focusing on the accounter address how the accounter’s goals can most effectively be achieved, or how the accounter can influence the accountee to achieve what the accounter wants. These studies explore mechanisms for achieving the accounter’s goals. The process normally consists of 1) clarifying goals to the accountee 2) a reporting by the accountee and 3) consequences for the accountee based on their success in achieving the accounter’s desires. Studies that focus on the accountee address how accountability mechanisms psychologically and behaviorally impact the accountable person. They study how people act when they are held “accountable” (Tetlock and Kim, 1987; Lerner and Tetlock, 1999).
One core approach involves principal/agent theories, or simply agency theories. The principal corresponds to the accounter and the agent to the accountee. These theories specify a hierarchical relationship. The principal has ownership, physical or moral, of some resource and a (normally expert) agent is assigned to either do specific things, or to manage the resources in the best interests of the principal.

Principal/agent theories normally frame a problem of how the principal can ensure desired behavior of the agent. The economic literature that addresses the subject assumes self interested behavior and identifies the problem to be devising a mechanism influencing an agent to carry out the principal’s interest rather then her own (Ross, 1973). Principal/agent literature originally centered on contract and employment law and later addressed electoral politics.

Economists borrowed from the insurance literature concepts of adverse selection and moral hazard (Pauly, 1968). Adverse selection refers to selecting an agent who is uninterested or unqualified to serve the principal’s interests. The process of selecting the right agent “failed” – resulting in an adverse situation for the principal. In the insurance literature, the insurer has accepted a bad risk. Moral Hazard refers to actions carried out after an agent is selected. If an insured person makes more claims than they would if they were paying the whole cost themselves, the principal suffers a loss. This result is framed in normative terms. If any agent seeks their own interest rather than that of the principal’s they are said to be morally flawed-- thus the term moral hazard.

The general business literature on accountability addresses private sector business managers and, their efforts to ensure that employees do what they are “supposed” to do for the employer’s benefit (Simon, 1951). The framing perspective, again, is on the employer, the relationship is hierarchical and power based, and the assumption is that the principals’ desires are normatively paramount. The articulated problem is how to provide incentive systems (both positive and negative) to improve the “performance” of the agent/employee. Performance is implicitly the increase in profits for the owners.
The education field has currently developed an accountability based discourse. The discussion is primarily about how to hold teachers and schools accountable for their teaching (e.g. Jones and Egley, 2006). Accountable means how school employees can be influenced to increase the performance of students. Student examinations at every level, but particularly for high school graduation can be understood as holding both students and teachers accountable for learning. The articulated problem is to improve schools. The principal wants good schools and students who learn. The agents are assumed to require “incentives” to accomplish this task. They require positive and negative reinforcements to perform their best.

**Applicability to Public Administration**

Accountability on the political side of the public sector is explicit. Elected officials are assumed to be accountable to citizens through the electoral process (McGraw, 1991). Some challenge the reality of accountability arguing that media, money and the candidate selection system drive the process (Breaux and Gierzynski, 1991). They argue that citizen choice is limited by a party based system that produces institutional candidates, and that elections are determined by superficial advertising. The high reelection rate for incumbents in Congress is often noted (Erickson, 1995). Despite cynicism over elections, the assumption of accountability remains (Persson, Torsten, Gérard Roland and Guido Tabellini, 1997).

The accountability of public managers is often explained with principal/agent theory (Wood, 1988; Cook, 1989). The discussion normally involves the concept of delegation of power from legislative to executive agency (Volden, 2002; Smith and Cotter, 1957; Powell, 1912). Yet while legislatures can delegate power they cannot delegate electoral accountability. The frame of discussion often addresses how and to whom the public manager is accountable (Rohr, 1986). Some literature explores resistance of executive branch agencies to guidance by elected or appointed executives (Behn, 2001). Such perceptions of resistance have resulted in the creation of executive branch agencies
(particularly budgetary) that are non-civil service and report directly to the elected executive.

The civil service system begun in 1883 might actually be seen as an effort to reduce political accountability. Public employment during the 19th century spoils era was certainly “at will” employment. Civil Service protections and the number of public employees covered by such systems grew until 1930 when over 80% of federal employees were covered (http://www.answers.com/topic/civil-service). Since then, the number has declined and in some cases civil service protections have been eliminated altogether in the interests of accountability (Hays and Sowa 2006).

In search of accountability, performance measures and performance based budgeting are increasingly implemented in both federal and state systems (Jordan and Hackbart, 2005). These measures hold organizations responsible for achieving specific, measurable goals, with the implication that if they do not, the organization will suffer in the budget process. The assumption is that agency management will enforce performance at employee levels. The federal government’s Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) mandated the establishment of performance measures. The GAO notes that “The Government Performance and Results Act of 1993 seeks to shift the focus of government decision making and accountability away from a preoccupation with the activities that are undertaken - such as grants dispensed or inspections made - to a focus on the results of those activities, such as real gains in employability, safety, responsiveness, or program quality. Under the Act, agencies are to develop multiyear strategic plans, annual performance plans, and annual performance reports.”

(http://www.gao.gov/new.items/gpra/gpra.htm)

In a continuing effort to establish accountability, the Performance Assessment and Rating Tool (PART) was developed in 2002 to explicitly connect budgets to performance. The Whitehouse website notes “The PART was developed to assess and improve program performance so that the Federal government can achieve better results. A PART review helps identify a program’s strengths and weaknesses to inform funding and management
decisions aimed at making the program more effective” (http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/part/). The push for performance measures also privileges measures which can be quantified and monetized.

In the next sections of this paper I will survey the functions, mechanism and assumptions of the accountability story.

**Functions of Accountability**

A functional approach to accountability examines behavioral outcomes of accountability systems. Accountability is essentially an instrument of control. The overriding function is the creation of a power relationship between the accounter and accountee. All power relationships include a variety of transactional dynamics including defensiveness, subordination, subservience, and condescension. An accountability system is deemed effective if agents accomplish the desires of principals.

The second function of accountability is to assign blame and credit. The accountability story creates a collective understanding of a world determined by cause and effect relationships. Perceived events must have a cause, and that cause attributed to an actor-individual or organizational- whose actions or inactions can be assigned credit or blame.

The function of blame is an ancient one. The concept of scapegoat is described in Leviticus 16: “But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness…..And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness.”

Assigning blame to others has the function of excusing blame for self (Dies, 1970; Wang and Anderson, 1994). If the fault is assigned to one, only that one needs to change. If the accouter can blame the accountee, then the accounter need not examine their own actions. Assigning blame (and/or making sacrifices) provides psychological satisfaction
that the accounter has done the right thing, has punished the wrong, and thereby taken measures to ensure it will not happen again.

Accountability studies may address the overall nature of accountability systems. They may propose a normative need for accountability based on moral, as well as functional or instrumental reasons. There may be a psycho-social need for perceived “justice,” quite apart from any desired results (Squires, 1968). In such cases, the function of accountability is to punish past performance more than ensure future performance, thus creating a perception of justice.

An accounting system may also be based on a need for sensemaking (Weick, 1995) to provide an acceptable story explaining why circumstances or events have happened and to assert that the world operates in predictable and understood ways. For instance McConnell (1971) explores how accountability limits autonomy and enforces conformity. Accountability helps us understand (a version of) our existence.

**Mechanism**

The mechanism for accountability includes a reporting element and an incentive element intended to control behavior of accountees. Accountability requires either formal reporting or submission to external evaluation on the part of the subordinate actor. Formal reporting may be required at specified time periods or upon demand. It may be a general overview, but more and more it is a reporting of pre-specified performance measures. Performance measures may be applied to either individuals or organizational groups. Formal reporting in the form of a program evaluation is almost always required for grants to organizations. Reporting often includes distribution to the general public either through written reports or more currently through posting to websites. External evaluations may examine predetermined specific measures - often financial - or more holistically and subjectively examine activities.

Accountability systems also include mechanisms of incentives and disincentives - either material or esteem and either formal or informal. The requirement of reporting itself
provides its own accountability incentive, but the influence on the accountee is most effective if the accountee believes there are consequences for individual or organizational outcomes.

Consequences of reporting are often nebulous, and the effect on the accountee uncertain. Material incentives are primarily monetary, in the form of increased budgets or performance payments to individuals. Formal non-monetary incentives may be in the form of honors or awards. Informal incentives may be affirming comments or general reputation gains. Material disincentives may be a decrease in funding for organizations or non-renewal of grants. For individuals it may be the reduction of pay, elimination of pay increases or termination of the employment. Informal disincentives include professional reputation and may increase in intensity with the transparency of reporting.

**Assumptions**

There are a number of interlocking and overlapping assumptions contained in the concept “accountability.” Underlying the accountability mechanism is the instrumentally rational assumption of economic self interest in which individuals respond to incentives and disincentives in a manner predictably shaped by self interest. The problem for the principal is to devise mechanisms that provide effective incentives or disincentives to accomplish the desired ends of the principal. The greater the power of the principal the more certainly they can apply incentives or disincentives.

A second assumption involves an understanding of reality where all actions are individual and discrete. To examine an action means to examine an individual and their motivations. An assumption of individual motivations and actions precludes an understanding of systemic or collaborative motivations.

The third assumption is that the desires or wishes of principals, accounters or those creating and enforcing the accountability system are normatively “right.” The accountability story is based on structured power relationships where subordination to those in power is assumed to be an individual voluntary choice. Obedience to those in
power is assumed to be virtuous because of the voluntary contractual principal/agent relationship. The contract defines virtue.

Fourth is the assumption that agents will not voluntarily do what principals want them to do. This derives from the individual understanding of action and the assumption of self interest. Goals are not collective, but individual. Benefiting others is not acting in one’s self interest (at least not directly). Therefore, incentives must be created to construct a situation where benefiting the principal is in the self interest of the agent. In the democratic public arena, principals are the elected representatives of the people, and indirectly citizens themselves.

Fifth is the assumption of attributability, which derives from our need to make sense of our world. Attributability constructs a world of discrete events with a linear, directional, instrumental cause and effect understanding of reality. Outcomes are the result of actions taken by specific individuals or groups. Only with this construction can we assign blame or credit to individuals. This understanding is supported by the dominant religious understanding of reality which requires individuals to be individually judged by the deity (Hertzberg, 1975).

A subset of this assumption is that accountees or agents have instrumental control over outcomes. Individuals have free will. Events in the world are the result of choices of individual actors, and those actions determine social outcomes. There is a definite individual locus of control over the world.

Finally, underlying all of these assumptions is a further assumption that individuals see the same picture of the world. Likewise words and concepts that make up the accountability frame are understood the same way.

Results/outcomes

The assumptions outlined above help construct a perceived reality. First, accountability systems structure relationships into hierarchical power configurations that are adversarial
and competitive. The accountability story marginalizes collaborative relationships as it frames the world individually.

The accountability narrative encourages blindness to systemic and institutional influences on the human condition. Through its emphasis on identifying a discrete cause, person or organization, accountability ignores any holistic construction, any gestalt understanding of existence. Blame is attributed and once it is attributed, no further effort is required to understand what is happening and why it is happening.

Accountability and performance measures are almost always limited to a few main goals, ignoring the many smaller elements of any situation. There is a tendency to establish accountability for things that are easily measurable, and easily monetized. The accountability story privileges monetary goals over those that are less easily measured.

The accountability story as a blame game leads us through a tunnel vision of linear causation, allowing us to ignore personal responsibility in the construction of the situation and providing political cover for any responsibility of persons other than those specified to be “accountable.”

The accountability narrative provides an illusion of control. For accountability to “work,” we must imagine a world of definite and predictable cause and effect mechanisms. We must imagine that people have control of outcomes. Once we structure our understanding of the world in that fashion, we come to believe we control events and can achieve specified outcomes if those who are “accountable” will only do their job “right.”

Following the illusion of control, the accountability narrative invites us to join an illusion of justice. We imagine we can (indeed, we must) identify cause and effect of discrete events. Once cause and effect are identified, credit and blame can be assigned. Once credit and blame are identified, incentives and disincentives are morally due those who
are “accountable.” We imagine we have made the world a “fairer” place. We imagine we have rewarded good and punished evil. We believe we have achieved justice.

The accountability game provides emotional security that we understand the world, and that we control events. It protects us from responsibility for our collectively constructed reality. And it comforts us to know we have delivered justice by rewarding good and punishing evil.

References


