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Understanding power and accountability in different governance paradigms

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Overview

- Power and accountability
- Resource distribution and power
- Power over, power to, power with
- Principal-agent, multi-directional and prospective accountability
- Power and accountability in TPA, NPM and NPG contexts
- Summary

Power and accountability

- “Speak truth to power” (Wildavsky 1979)
- “Hold power to account” (Mulgan 2003)

Yet we need power and resources (information, access, sanctions) in order to do this!

How actors use their resources to exercise this power influences the accountability relationship



Resource distribution and power

Following Rhodes' (1981) theory of bargaining in intergovernmental relations

- The desirability and distribution of resources within governance networks shapes power relations between interdependent actors. Actors that possess more of those resources that are in greatest demand are less dependent on others in the network, and therefore have more power
- This applies both vertically (between central-local government) and also horizontally (e.g. between a public body and non-state actors) (Eckersley 2017)
- Power is necessary to exercise accountability
- Therefore: we would expect changes in the distribution of resources and power dynamics to change accountability relationships
- **Our question: how could changes in power relationships affect accountability, and how might they apply in different governance contexts?**

Power over, power to, power with

- **Power over:** “A has power over B to the extent that he (*sic*) can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl, 1957)
 - Three ‘faces’ (Lukes 1974): powerful actors control most resources (legal, financial, discursive) and can ensure that others act to perpetuate the *status quo* in power relations
 - Implies *coercion* or even ‘violence’ (Arendt 1970). Power as a finite resource in a zero-sum game

But actors can exercise power without necessarily affecting others. Power as ‘being *empowered*: having *the resources to achieve your political objectives* (Stone 1989; Matthews 2011)

- **Power to** “get things done” (Parsons 1963)
 - Relevant for individual actors seeking to pursue their own desires
- And **power with** others as part of a collective (Partzsch 2017; Pansardi and Bindi)
 - Seeking to achieve shared goals together, and pooling resources to do so

Principal-agent, multi-directional and prospective accountability

- Principals hold agents to account through ‘vertical’ relationships (Mayston 1993; Mulgan 2000)
 - Agents respond to principals’ instructions, and principals can impose sanctions to reduce the risk of abuse
 - In democracies, we would expect principals to exercise power over agents
- ‘Multi-directional’ accountability: the vertical principal-agent perspective is too simplistic: actors are (also) accountable horizontally and diagonally (Bovens 2005; Schillemans 2011)
 - To ‘the market’ (through contracts, SLAs, voice and choice mechanisms)
 - To other government departments and agencies (through inspectorates and professional networks)
- ‘Prospective’ accountability (Visser 2016; Murphy et al 2019)
 - Accountability needs to be more forward-looking and focus on learning and improvement. It should not (just) be about retrospective control, box-ticking and blame games

Governance paradigms

- **Traditional Public Administration (Weber 1922)**
 - Government characterised by bureaucratic hierarchies
 - Culminates in Westminster-style ministerial accountability for policy and delivery
 - Underpinned by 'public service' ethos and representative democracy
- **New Public Management (Hood 1991)**
 - Separation of policy and delivery through agencification, privatisation, outsourcing, etc.
 - Focus on efficiency and effectiveness, monitored through performance targets and inspections and market mechanisms
 - Underpinned by on 'public choice' critique and democracy through the market
- **New Public Governance (Osborne 2006)**
 - 'Joined-up government' to address problems of fragmentation caused by NPM
 - Co-production, co-creation, greater horizontal working between governance actors and with society
 - Underpinned by public value and participative democracy
- These are 'pure', ideal-versions – in reality, most governance contexts are a mixture of all three

Power and accountability in different governance paradigms

Paradigm	Prevailing logic	Conceptualisation of democracy	Conceptualisation of power			Conceptualisation of accountability		
			<i>Distribution of resources</i>	<i>Resource (inter)dependency</i>	<i>Power relationship</i>	<i>Direction</i>	<i>Rationale</i>	<i>Focus</i>
TPA	Public service	Representative	Concentrated in principal	Agents largely dependent on principals	Principal has power over the agent	Predominantly vertical (principal-agent)	Enhance democracy	Retrospective and controlling
NPM	Public choice	Market-based	Diffused amongst government and contractors	Actors operate largely independently of each other	Actors seek power to achieve individual objectives	Multi-directional	Public sector efficiency	Bureaucratic and contractual
NPG	Public value	Participative	Shared across society	Actors collaborate interdependently	Actors work together to generate power <i>with</i>	Predominantly horizontal	Generate public value	Prospective and constructive

Summary

- Literatures on accountability and power have evolved alongside governance paradigms, but with little cross-referencing
- Power and accountability are inextricably linked, but only inversely proportionate in zero-sum contexts
- How resources are distributed within governance networks (*to whom*) affects the type of power that actors exercise, and how accountability operates (or not):
 - **In TPA contexts**, where principals have the requisite resources they can exercise power *over* agents and hold them to account
 - **In NPM contexts**, resources are distributed more symmetrically between government, agencies and contractors. Contractors seek to exercise power *to* and sometimes operate independently of government clients. This makes traditional accountability difficult and complex, and also means market-based contractual accountability is not always effective
 - **In NPG contexts**, resources are shared across society and governance actors collaborate to generate power *with* citizens. Accountability is more focused on learning together
- NPG based on the principle of trust: societal actors will not abuse the resources and power they receive, and horizontal mechanisms will be sufficient to hold them to account. Risk of backsliding into NPM?



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Thank you

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