



The Hauser Center
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**Placing the Normative Logics of Accountability
in “Thick” Perspective¹**

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Abstract

This paper provides a critical reflection on the heavily normative nature of current accountability debates. In particular, three streams of normative discourse on nonprofit accountability are identified: improving board governance; improving performance-based reporting; and, demonstrating progress towards mission. A focus on these normative logics, while important, can mask the realities of social structure and the relations of power that underlie them. The paper thus proposes a more empirical approach to framing accountability problems — “thick description” and interpretation that might enable us better to understand how social regimes of accountability actually operate — and in which the instruments of accountability are at least as likely to reproduce relationships of inequality as they are to overturn them.

The discussion on accountability in nonprofit organizations and elsewhere has tended to be heavily normative. This is not surprising, since a key purpose of the accountability policy discourse is to promote behaviors that are socially or legally legitimated and to prevent those that are not. However, is it not possible that policy debates on accountability conflate its normative claims with its actual effects? In other words, is there a rift between how accountability is imagined and how it actually operates? As the authors of a background paper for a United Nations Human Development Report put it, “Accountability is often derided as a cure-all development buzzword: a fit subject for exhortation, but something that in most parts of the world is rarely achieved because it demands too much compassion of the powerful and too much undiluted civic virtue from ordinary citizens.”³

I would like to propose in this short essay that a focus on normative logics of accountability, while important, can mask the realities of social structure and the relations of power that underlie them. A turn to more grounded empirical work that examines how accountability systems and regimes operate might offer new perspectives and, more importantly, new ways of practicing accountability.

Three Streams of Normative Logic in Nonprofit Accountability

In the standard normative logic, the problem of accountability is frequently cast in technocratic terms; it is a problem of poor oversight or inadequate representation, amenable to correction

³ Anne Marie Goetz and Rob Jenkins. 2002. "Voice, Accountability and Human Development: The Emergence of a New Agenda." Background paper for the U.N. Human Development Report 2002, page 5. Available at: <http://hdr.undp.org/publications/papers.cfm>

through stringent regulation, enhanced regimes for disclosure, monitoring, and enforcement, and more representative electoral and decision making processes (in the case of democratic organizations and systems). A veritable slew of definitions emerge from attempts to frame accountability in these terms, such as “the means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority (or authorities) and are held responsible for their actions”⁴, or “the capacity to demand someone engage in reason-giving to justify her behavior, and/or the capacity to impose a penalty for poor performance.”⁵ This “original core of accountability” is premised on external scrutiny, supported by justification, sanctions and control.⁶

This is a principal-agent view of accountability, in which the lead actor or principal sets goals and employs agents to accomplish them. In public institutions, particularly in modern democracies, such forms of accountability can be applied to two broad sets of relations: between citizens who, as principals, elect candidates to office as their agents; and, between those elected politicians who oversee the work of public administrators and other bureaucrats who act as their agents and, by extension, as agents of the public. The primary accountability problematique thus lies in constraining the opportunistic behavior of agents.

Within the nonprofit sector, where relationships among actors are rarely based on election, efforts to constrain opportunistic behavior are guided by three streams of normative logic. The first stream focuses on organizational governance which often, but not always, centers on the

⁴ Michael Edwards and David Hulme. 1996. "Too Close for Comfort? The Impact of Official Aid on Nongovernmental Organizations." *World Development*, 24:961-973, quote p.967.

⁵ Op. cit., Goetz and Jenkins, 2002, p. 5.

⁶ Richard Mulgan. 2000. "'Accountability': An Ever-Expanding Concept?" *Public Administration* 78:555-573, quote pp. 555-557.

board.⁷ The board is the nexus of standards of care, loyalty and obedience; its role and composition have figured importantly in the discussions and recommendations emerging from the Panel on the Nonprofit Sector and Sarbanes-Oxley legislation. The basic premise is that boards are responsible not only for policy direction but also for oversight of internal controls, and that failures within an organization are reflective of failures of guidance and oversight at the board level.

The second normative stream centers on performance-based reporting, built on the assumption that organizations should be held to account for what they deliver. The mechanisms of accountability thus seek to measure performance, aiming to quantify or narrate it in annual reports, project reports, logical frameworks, and so on. The purpose of such accountability is to demonstrate “results.” A common complaint about such accountability mechanisms is that they often reflect the interests of funders or donors, in that the metrics tend to be easily quantifiable and designed to be more useful to donors as part of their annual budget cycles (in showing that they have funded “success”) than they are of use to nonprofit managers for purposes of strategic decision making.

A third and more emergent normative stream of logic seeks to rein in opportunism by focusing on the expressed *raison d’etre* of a nonprofit organization: its mission. If nonprofits exist for purposes of public good, why not ask them to demonstrate progress towards achieving that mission? Doing so would require clearer specification of metrics related to mission, and better

⁷ The elision of “governance” with “board,” which is quite common in American, Canadian and British nonprofit practice, is less apparent in the global South. See, for example, Ian Smillie and John Hailey’s (2001) study, *Managing for Change: Leadership, Strategy and Management in Asian NGOs*. London: Earthscan.

public reporting on their achievement. One might describe this as a mission-centered variant of performance-based accountability. Challenges of organizational learning factor prominently in this discussion. Among international civil society organizations, a number of experiments are currently underway to examine more closely these links.⁸

These three streams of normative logic are not mutually exclusive. Boards are responsible for serving the mission and for overseeing performance. Donors consider mission in selecting which organizations to fund. In her summary comments to a previous conference at the Hauser Center in 2003, Nancy Rosenblum identified just such a combination — “accountability to boards for internal working and mission” — as being of paramount concern.⁹

Problems with Normative Logics

It is possible that a reliance on these normative logics of accountability poses a risk: *that framings of accountability problems and their solutions tend to be driven by normative agendas rather than by empirical realities*. A normative approach tends to proceed formulaically: identify the agents and principals, specify the problems, define the standards, monitor and enforce them.

A more empirical approach to framing and solving accountability problems would require turning to what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once called “thick description” — observation and interpretation that might enable us better to understand how a social regime (such as accountability in our case) actually operates, how it is appropriated and manipulated, how it

⁸ Among the most closely watched experiments involve Action Aid International, Keystone Reporting, and the Humanitarian Accountability Project.

⁹ Nancy Rosenblum. 2003. Synthesis remarks presented at the Nonprofit Scholars Conference: Crisis of Governance: Implications for the Nonprofit/Non-Governmental Sector. April 3-5. Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University.

varies across social and cultural contexts, and with what effects. The value of doing so is practical: if we have a grounded sense of how nonprofit organizations and their clients are affected by the current accountability climate, then it may help us to reframe accountability problems and their solutions in ways that reflect practice.

In this spirit, scholars Dubnick and Justice¹⁰ argue for a socially constructed analysis, cautioning that “students of accountability must be prepared to deal with alternative and shifting manifestations of the concept depending on the issue and arena being examined.” For them, the word “accountability” serves to cover, conceal and mask disparate meanings and realities, precisely because so much semantic freight is conveyed by it. Scholars must thus seek to uncover the *effects* of accountability: how and to what extent its mechanisms and techniques serve to reinforce existing relations of power, or under what circumstances they result in reconfigurations. This is a skeptic’s view, and one in which the tools of the trade — disclosure and surveillance, standards and regulation, monitoring and compliance, sanctions and deterrents — are more likely to serve the interests of the powerful than the weak through the control of those very tools and expertise employed to validate them.¹¹ This does not mean that accountability mechanisms cannot enable social change, but rather that one must look to the effects of those mechanisms to understand their impacts and operations, rather than the rhetoric that motivates and accompanies them.

10 Melvin J. Dubnick and Jonathan B. Justice. 2004. "Accounting for Accountability." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association. Chicago (September 2-5), pp. 14, 20.

¹¹ In Foucauldian terms, accountability may thus be seen as part of a new set of disciplinary knowledges or *savoirs*, with its attendant forms of measurement, monitoring, auditing, and punishment. Accountability, in this sense, is a subset of “governmentality,” which Foucault has described as an “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power.” See Foucault, Michel. 1991. "Governmentality." in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, edited by Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 102.

What does such an approach imply, in practical terms, for studying the nonprofit sector? Again, the presentations by Nancy Rosenblum and Robert Goodin at the previous Hauser Center conference offer some ways forward.

- First, there is a need for empirical work on the broader political and structural context in which accountability demands are made (i.e., the accountability “regime”). While Rosenblum noted that nonprofits are often poor at measuring performance and results — they frequently have ambiguous goals, they do not regularly perform evaluations, and they do not seem to think that information is necessary for accomplishing objectives — she also observed that it “does not appear that donors . . . or funders provide [the] incentives” for better accountability. In particular, she cautioned that the funding environment creates a “ceaseless preoccupation with money” among nonprofit leaders, and that there is “[n]othing more important than understand[ing] the politics of foundations, of granting agencies.” The pressures emerging from the three normative logics noted above (of governance, performance, and mission) may make more sense when grounded within the realities of this structural context.
- Second, and relatedly, there is a need for evaluation of accountability regimes. What have been the effects of more stringent reporting and disclosure requirements (by funders or regulators) on nonprofits? Have efforts in self regulation (such as certification standards by nonprofit associations) led to improved governance or performance? In other words, has the accountability revolution actually led to better accountability, and according to whom?

- Third, there is a need to understand better how nonprofit networks might constitute an alternative or complement to regulatory power. Goodin has suggested that “network-based accountability” could be a distinctive *guarantor* of accountability among nonprofits (as compared to the public and private sectors), operating through “monitoring and reputational sanctioning” among a group of actors that share a common set of social concerns.¹² Rosenblum is more skeptical, arguing that networks do not constitute an accountability regime, since a network does not involve regulatory power “with capacity to set standards, monitor and enforce.” There is, however, some empirical evidence that networks can have teeth, but the conditions under which this is possible remain to be further elaborated.¹³ Again, there is a need for further empirical work rather than normative prescription.

For observers of accountability, this discussion can be summarized as pointing to two general sets of analytical assumptions. As indicated above, accountability discourses are frequently framed as a technocratic or administrative issue where problems are relatively identifiable, e.g., mismanagement of financial resources for personal gain, fraud, and other forms of malfeasance. The solutions that follow from this form of problem framing tend to be fairly straightforward, e.g., tougher regulation, codes of conduct, sanctions. This may be classified as a positivist and modernist view of accountability where it is assumed that more information and transparency can reveal the “truth” about behavior, thus making corrective action or rectification possible. As a line of inquiry, this approach leads to questions such as: What standards or measures are

¹² Robert E. Goodin. 2003. “Democratic Accountability: The Third Sector and All,” paper presented at the Nonprofit Scholars Conference: Crisis of Governance: Implications for the Nonprofit/Non-Governmental Sector. April 3-5. Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University.

¹³ See, for example, L. David Brown’s work on mutual accountability networks and Ian Smillie’s work on a cross-sector network to ban blood diamonds, both forthcoming in Ebrahim and Weisband, op. cit.

indicative of good, or poor, behavior and performance? How can such behavior be monitored? What are the managerial skills necessary? What penalties for non-compliance will deter such behavior in the future?

A second and more skeptical approach to accountability treats it as a social phenomenon, in which its actual impacts are a result of relationships of power and interplays among actors. This offers new directions for examining nonprofit accountability that are both normative and empirical. First, the social nature of accountability suggests that there may be contradictory and contested normative perspectives. Given that current normative logics privilege boards and strategic decision makers, what other groups might have accountability interests? For example, for a nonprofit organization that works with homeless communities, what are the perspectives of its clients on organizational governance, performance, and mission? How do these perspectives compare with the traditional normative focus on boards and management? There has been some movement in this regard in the sector, particularly in the use of beneficiary and citizen assessments by nonprofits and grantee perception reports by foundations, but they remain fairly marginal.¹⁴

In addition, the social nature of accountability brings into question the metrics used for performance assessment. It leads to questions such as: What kinds of knowledge are considered legitimate or valid in designing and implementing accountability and performance systems? What kinds of information, knowledge, and expertise are devalued? How do the mechanisms of accountability serve to reproduce, or alter, existing configurations of power? Metrics thus become linked to concerns about power: why certain metrics are selected over others, who

¹⁴ See, for example, the citizen voice assessment initiated by Keystone (www.keystonereporting.org) and the grantee perception reports promoted by the Center for Effective Philanthropy (www.effectivephilanthropy.com).

decides what metrics are important, who collects the data, who interprets it, and who decides how to use it.

This approach to accountability — in which accountability is seen as a social construct to be examined through better empirical analysis — implies that instruments of accountability are at least as likely to reproduce relationships of inequality as they are to overturn them. This may be the case regardless of whether one makes the normative choice of focusing on board-level governance, performance measurement, or mission, for solving (and framing) the ills of accountability. At the very least, it suggests that the reality of accountability is ambiguous — as a socially embedded, politicized, and value-heavy construction.