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The Oxford Handbook *of*
PUBLIC
ACCOUNTABILITY

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

PUBLIC

ACCOUNTABILITY

Edited by

MARK BOVENS, ROBERT E. GOODIN

and

THOMAS SCHILLEMANS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

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MARK BOVENS, THOMAS SCHILLEMANS, AND
ROBERT E. GOODIN

PROLIFERATION AND FRAGMENTATION

ACCOUNTABILITY is the buzzword of modern governance. In legislation introduced between 2001 and 2006 into the US Congress, the word "accountability" occurred in the title of between 50 and 70 proposed bills in each two-year cycle (Dubnick 2007, 8). More recently, when US President Obama launched his Recovery Act in response to the global financial crisis, it had three main goals: creating new jobs, spurring economic activity, and to "foster unprecedented levels of *accountability* and transparency in government spending."[1] The quest for accountability also manifests itself in many other national jurisdictions, as well as in supranational policy actors such as the European Union (EU), the World Bank, or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Indeed, "public accountability" has been a key theme in public management reforms around the globe (Christensen and Lægreid 2011, 12). In the first part of this handbook, Melvin J. Dubnick provides empirical evidence of the growing frequency of the term's use, based on a million scanned volumes drawn from works published in English between 1800 and 2005. While the term first appears in the plotted sample during the early 1800s, it remains a culturally innocuous term until the 1960s and 1970s, when we see a very sharp and increasing upturn in its usage, which continues well into the twenty-first century. In the final part of this volume, Matthew Flinders claims that because of the industrious accountability work by so many scholars, accountability is emerging as the *Über-concept* of the twenty-first century.

The rising prominence of "accountability" in public discourse has given rise in turn to a burgeoning of attention to "accountability" in recent academic scholarship. It has been an object of scholarly debate and analysis in, for example, political science,

public administration, international relations (IR), social psychology, constitutional law, and business administration. However, in each of the sub-disciplines, scholars analyze concepts of accountability and practices of account-giving unaware of, and still less building on, each other's achievements. As a result, academic scholarship on accountability, although booming, is highly fragmented and non-cumulative. Virtually every different author sets out to produce his or her own definition of accountability. Virtually every new author or editor uses his or her own concepts, conceptualizations, and frames for studying accountability—often with different conceptualizations being employed across chapters within the same edited volume. Some writers use the concept very loosely, others define it much more narrowly and tightly. But few of these definitions are fully compatible. Cumulative and commensurable research is difficult if not impossible in such circumstances.

Against this background of proliferation and fragmentation, this handbook aims to unify. This volume provides, for the first time, a comprehensive overview of the current scholarship on the topic—one which systematically takes stock of this burgeoning field organized around the conceptual framework developed in this chapter. It provides a state of the art overview of the recent scholarship on public accountability, collecting, consolidating, and integrating inquiries currently scattered across a broad range of disciplines and sub disciplines. Its comprehensive character, incorporating a wide range of topics and disciplines, will make it a touchstone not only for practitioners and established students of good governance in the public and the private sectors, but also for students and other newcomers to the field.

As background to the endeavor, this introductory chapter will provide a basic, conceptual framework for the analysis of accountability. In the course of doing that, it will also provide an overview of recent work in accountability across various fields, illustrating some of the important commonalities and differences. Finally, this introduction also provides a roadmap situating the different parts of this handbook in the landscape of current accountability studies.

Historical Roots

Accountability is a concept that has taken on ever-new shades of meaning, with its increased usage over the course of the past decades (Mulgan 2000; Flinders 2011). Accountability has been described as an "icon," a "hurrah-word," and a "chameleon"; it is an elusive and much (perhaps essentially) contested concept. Clearly, accountability means many different things to different authors and readers. Still and all, accountability—if not the concept then at least the underlying practices—has ancient and fairly unequivocal roots.

The idea of accountability is historically rooted in the practice of book-keeping and in the discipline of accounting (see Bovens 2005; Hayne and Salterio in this volume). Accounting always has a dual meaning: it is about listing and counting important "things"—possessions, debts, agreements, promises—and about providing an account concerning this count. Thus it implies telling a story, based on some obligation and with some consequence in view.

Accountability is anchored in the mundane yet important practice of record-keeping and gives rise to story-telling in a context of social (power) relations within which enforcement of standards and the fulfillment of obligations is a reasonable expectation.

This connection between counting, accounting, story-telling, and social power relations has ancient roots. In his tale of the development of written languages, Jared Diamond (1999)—without actually making too much of it—describes how the few independently developed written languages have evolved from record-keeping activities. Consider the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, who before 3000 BC developed the first written language. They used clay tokens for accounting purposes, "recording numbers of sheep and amounts of grain" (1999, 218). A system of writing gradually developed, which increasingly allowed Sumerians to convey more complex, and arguably more interesting, messages than stock-keeping records. Similarly, the written Cherokee language was developed by an Indian called Sequoyah around 1820, in a conscious effort to copy the white man's apparently beneficial use of "scribbling on paper." Sequoyah's code was also, initially, a book-keeper's tool. Diamond (1999, 228) recounts: "Sequoyah was illiterate and could neither speak nor read English. Because he was a blacksmith, Sequoyah began by devising an accounting system to help him keep track of his customers' debts." His approach soon became more sophisticated—he started borrowing signs from English and attributed totally new meanings to them. Within a short span of time, the Cherokee community became 100 percent literate and "they began printing books and newspapers." Here, again, clever and pretty straightforward book-keeping soon led to an ability to convey more complex stories in public settings.

The etymological roots of the English concept of "accountability" stem from the Middle Ages when, as Dubnick (2007) points out, it was first used in its current connotation in the Domesday books by William I in 1085, as a translation for the French expression "comptes a rendre." The Domesday books held very accurate accounts of all the possessions of the king, which is to say, everything in his realm. In roughly the same vein, the 13th century French Archbishop of Rouen, Eudes de Rigaud, visited all the religious houses in his jurisdiction and made detailed notes of his findings (Dunbabin 2007; Vincent 2007). In both medieval examples, accountability refers to the counting of possessions and classifying information on the basis of implicit or explicit norms and conventions. In both instances, also, agents were *obliged* to provide answers to the questions posed to them by the accountants on behalf of their master, be it William I or Eudes de Rigaud. Accountability thus has a relational core to it; it refers to the obligation to provide an account *to*, usually, a superior or at least someone with a legitimate stake.

ACCOUNTABILITY RESEARCH: A MINIMAL CONCEPTUAL CONSENSUS

The historical legacy of accountability contains a number of constants that can serve as a basis for a minimal conceptual consensus. It would be a gross overstatement to claim

that all contemporary scholars of public accountability adhere to this minimal defini-tional consensus of accountability. For one thing, quite a few authors often provide *no* formal definitions at all. Many others develop their own typologies of accountability; in the process they elaborate a bewildering and ever growing variety of overlapping and competing conceptions of accountability. Nevertheless, beneath all this confusion, many authors base their analyses, either explicitly or more often implicitly, on this mini-mal conceptual consensus as will become evident from an overview of accountability research in various relevant disciplines.[2]

The *relational* and *communicative* core of accountability is clearly seen in the *social psychological* literature on accountability. Here, most authors define accountability as the expectation that one may be asked, often by an authority or one's superior, to justify one's thoughts, beliefs, or actions. Not all social psychology authors explicate this formal definition. Yet in their customary (quasi-)experimental approaches, this relational and communicative approach is inevitably manifest. Tetlock describes the social psycholog-ical approach as follows:

> Accountability is a critical rule and an enforcement mechanism—the social psycho-logical link between individual decision-makers on the one hand and social systems on the other. Expectations of accountability are an implicit or explicit constraint on virtually everything people do, "If I do this, how will others react?" Failure to act in ways for which one can construct acceptable accounts leads to varying degrees of censure, depending on the gravity of the offense and the norms of the society.
> (Tetlock 1992, 337; see also his Chapter 5 with Patil and Vieider in this volume)

The *accounting* literature is, at root, surprisingly concomitant with the social psycho-logical approach just described. In accountancy, the agent's obligation to provide an account of his behavior to an external party is the thread connecting the myriad of defi-nitions and research approaches deployed in the academic literature (see also Hayne and Salterio in this volume). Accountability, here, is about the "exchange of reasons for conduct" and aims to "verbally bridge the gap between action and expectation" (Messner 2009). But where the social psychological research primarily focuses on the communicative interaction between an agent and an audience and its effects on his (or her) choices and behavior, the accountancy literature logically connects with report-ing and book-keeping on the one side and with procedures and practices of audit and review on the other. The similarity between those disciplines lies in their use of the same base definitions of accountability that give rise to hugely disparate research interests and professional practices.

The above research traditions generally focus on individual persons, managers, firms, organizations or book-keepers as accountable actors. The *public administration* literature, in contrast, often shifts attention to the overarching perspective of gov-ernments, public bodies, policy fields, or entire sectors. Where accounting and social psychology scholars will often look at non-public and informal forms of accountability, public administration adamantly focuses on the *public* character of *formal* account-ability. Its focus is on systemic, structural forms of accountability for public service

provision or governments. In this branch of the literature, most authors adopt relational definitions of accountability, often leaning on the work by Romzek and Dubnick (1998), but also on Mulgan (2003), Strøm (2000), and Day and Klein (1987). It is striking to see here, how almost all authors start their definition with some variation on the theme that "accountability is about providing answers for your behavior" and then proceed to thicken this definition, which leads different authors in different directions. This super-ficial disparity masks the underlying consensus on first principles among such scholars regarding the conceptual fundamentals of accountability.

Public administration studies of public accountability tend to focus on forms of accountability in public service provision and regulation and on systemic, structural forms of accountability. The remaining three disciplines depart from this notion and display a more outspoken interest in *political* forms of accountability. These disciplines display a healthy appetite for the irregular, incidental case of accountability regarding incidents, misconduct, or criminal behavior, and, following from that, an appetite for the analysis of specific cases.

Political scientists often approach the issue from the perspective of power. Here, accountability generally denotes a relationship between elected politicians and their voters, sometimes mediated by parties, government representatives, or bureau-crats. Political scientists adopting this focus often define accountability along these lines: "accountability usually means that voters know, or can make good inferences about, what parties have done in office and reward or punish them conditional on these actions" (Stokes 2005, 316). As the opportunity for communication between actor and forum—captured in face-to-face accountability in social psychology—is virtually absent in large scale democracies, the hygienic role of sanctions and the opportunity to throw or vote the rascals out is more important. "Accountability = punishment" pre-dominates in this branch of the literature (see Mansbridge, Chapter 4 in this volume).

International relations research often focuses on specific cases of internationalization and its implications for accountability. Even when such authors refrain from providing formal definitions, they often implicitly assume that accountability essentially involves the idea that politicians, government representatives, and NGOs may be called upon to explain and justify their behavior to a variety of stakeholders—be they national, local, or transnational. As Mulgan (2003) has suggested, accountability can be rendered towards two types of accountability forums on the basis of different principles: one is the principle of ownership, which is central to most of the research in the political sci-ence literature. Citizens may demand answers from their representatives on the basis of ownership, as do the representatives themselves from the bureaucrats serving them. The other general basis for accountability is the principle of affected rights and interests, which is more often applicable to IR research (see Goodhart, Chapter 18 in this volume) and is also highly relevant in legal research. Third parties may demand accountability when some agent—be it a politician, government, agency, or firm—harms some right or interest, for instance when s/he pollutes the environment or violates human rights.

Where political science focuses on the behavior of powerful political agents, *con-stitutional law* scholars often focus on the norms that do or ought to govern political