

False Promises of Performance Accountability



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A Skeptic's View

- Living in the “Age of Accountability”
 - Extension of the Western “Enlightenment Project”
 - A New Age of Reason?
 - Or a New Age of False Promises?
- Accountability has become...
 - Pervasive: Being all things to all people.
 - Obsessive: The “holy grail” of governance.
 - Perversive: Distorting, misleading, perverting.

The Premises: Accountability in/is Governance

- Accountability exists and it plays a central (if not THE central) role in modern governance.
- Modern governance could not exist without the account-giving “posture” assumed in accountability.
 - ***Governance works because there are “governable” subjects who expect and accept to give an account of their actions.***
 - ***But their governability – their account giving posture – is an intrinsic quality, not easily subject to manipulation or management.***
- Policies based on accountability are “radical by nature” – they are engaging the *root relationships* that underpin governance.

Promises of Accountability 1

Pervasiveness of “accountability” today:

– Synonymic/chameleon-like:

- Equated with “good” governance – responsible, responsive, transparent, ethical, democratic, etc etc etc

– Symbolic/Iconic:

- Rhetorical tool, effective symbol with positive valence

– Indexical:

- Associated with desired ends of governance: THE PROMISES

Promises of Accountability 2

- **Promise of JUSTICE:**
 - The seeking of justice through confessional, juridical means (from trials to “truth and reconciliation”) will produce justice.
- **Promise of DEMOCRACY:**
 - Being able to hold agents accountable as definition of modern democracy.
- **Promise of ETHICS:**
 - Account giving requirements and oversight will result in truly ethical behavior.
- **Promise of PERFORMANCE:**
 - Holding people to account will improve desired performance-based outcomes.

Bad Premises/False Promises

- “Engineering logic” of accountability:
 - manipulation of account giving can be used to elicit “right” behavior.
- Assumes a certain model of “human nature”:
 - scientific management model: passive, malleable, dull-minded, recalcitrant “shirker”
- Unframed and untested:
 - lacks empirically sound theoretical support
- Subject to adverse and perverse consequences

Case of Performance 1

- The critical “black box”:



Case of Performance 2

- NPM:
 - Ambiguous: Lacks basic empirical theory
 - Paradoxical: Problems of “performatives”
 - Unsubstantiated: Untested and untestable?

Case of Performance 3

Schooling: The US case: focusing on test-based result

- No Child Left Behind is only “tip of iceberg”
- Technical issues (measurement – Lake Wobegon effect)
- Behavioral issues (perverse incentives)
- Policy issues: making things worse....
- “New Accountability”: works best where it is least effective – where it complements rather than changes the account-giving posture of teachers

Conclusions

- Not an effective policy instrument for change
 - May make matters worse
- Needs to be approached as object of change, rather than tool of change
 - Requires greater confidence in desired outcomes – certainty about the curriculum, pedagogy, etc