Accountability: the core concept and its subtypes

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Working Paper

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Accountability is a central concept in comparative politics. Yet its growing popularity in a number of applied fields, including development policy, has resulted in a dilution of its content and introduced an undesirable semantic confusion. This paper argues that it may still be possible to recover from this state of affairs, by resisting 'conceptual stretching' as recommended by Giovanni Sartori. The paper contributes with a synthesized approach based on a widely recognized set of core features of accountability, and provides a typology of subtypes with examples. Implications for empirical research include the importance of distinguishing between accountability and responsiveness, and the difficulty of aggregating findings about different subtypes of accountability to construct general conclusions in causal form.

1   Making Sense of Accountability

The concept of accountability has a long tradition in both political science and financial accounting. In political science, John Locke's theory of the superiority of representational democracy built on the notion that accountability is only possible when the governed are separated from the governors (Locke, 1690/1980; cf. Grant and Keohane, 2005). It was also a major concern for the fathers of the American constitution, and few areas have been as fundamental to thinking about the political system in America as accountability (e.g. Finer, 1941; Friedrich, 1940; Dubnick and Romzek, 1993).

The central idea from that time is still with us: when decision-making power is transferred from a principal (e.g. the citizens) to an agent (e.g. government), there must be a mechanism in place for holding the agent to account for their decisions and if necessary for imposing sanctions, ultimately by removing the agent from power. In accounting, the concept's long tradition is more limited in scope, referring to financial prudence and accounting in accordance with regulations and instructions (e.g. Normanton, 1966; Barton, 2006), but the principle of delegating some authority, evaluating performance and imposing sanctions is essentially the same.

In the last 10 to 15 years, however, the concept of accountability has become fashionable not just in expanding circles of political scientists and economists but among the broader community of scholars and practitioners concerned with such diverse areas as administration, development, business ethics, governance, international organizations, policy networks, democratization, civil society, and welfare state reform. To illustrate this growth with an example from just one sub-field: when Schmitter and Karl (1991) contended that accountability was the central key to most definitions of democracy, their claim was met with overwhelming indifference and occasional expressions of hostility (cf. Schmitter, 2004). A decade and a half later, a quick search with any of the academic search engines using 'accountability' in combination with 'democracy' or 'democratization' generates literally hundreds of results. Expanding the search to cover related fields in the social sciences, one is confronted with a dizzying number of entries, illustrating the magnitude of the explosion of articles on accountability in its various forms.

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Predictably, this proliferation has resulted in a myriad of meanings and dimensions associated with the concept of 'accountability'. To make matters worse, the international donor community and their veritable crowds of consultants have picked up on this trend in their focus on 'good governance' and added their (not always politically independent) peculiarities to the conceptual landscape. I write 'make matters worse' because of the inherent dangers of a byzantine conceptual nightmare leading not only to stretching (Sartori, 1970, 1984, 1991) but to severe confusion about what the core meaning of accountability is, accentuated by donor-inspired reformulations divorced from sound research practices.

One may reply 'so what?' since examples abound of 'essentially contested concepts' (Gallie, 1958; Collier et al., 2006) which have produced both interesting and fruitful theoretical debates and spurred further empirical research. This paper is not an argument against such informed engagement in advancement of key concepts in the social sciences. Rather, it is an effort to escape the dangers of 'hi-jacking' established concepts and endowing them with new meanings and dimensions which dilute their currency and create ambiguity, vagueness, and collective semantic confusion.

There is an important difference between a debate over the advantages and disadvantages of a few clearly delineated alternative definitions, and uncontrolled, myopic, and unrelated conceptual diversification. There are real dangers and costs to the conceptual confusion which can follow such developments. Indeed, if and when a concept takes on too many and at least partly contradictory meanings it loses its value as an analytical instrument. Studies using different notions of a concept such as accountability, and which arrive at different results, cannot be directly compared and therefore at best risk engaging in what can be likened to a 'dialogue of the deaf' rather than constructive theoretical and conceptual advance. At worst, results are transplaced from one meaning to the other resulting in false conclusions.

Are we at that point with regard to accountability? Perhaps not, but the current state of affairs bears an uncanny resemblance to the situation regarding 'diminished subtypes' in the study of democratization not long ago. For a while, scholars were constantly issuing new more or less helpful labels of democratically sub-optimal systems of rule. Collier and Levitsky (1995) reportedly stopped counting at 550 different 'democracy with adjectives' when reviewing the literature in the 1990s.[1] We have not gotten that far yet in descriptive labels of accountability but after reviewing a substantial portion of the literature I have nevertheless counted well beyond 100 different 'subtypes' and usages. It may well be that the battle is already lost and we will soon see the abandonment of accountability as an analytical construct in favour of more precise alternative concepts.

Yet, 'accountability' may still be useful if we are able to organize its usage appropriately. The key argument of this paper rests on the understanding that accountability is one of several methods of constraining power and thus subordinate to the concept of power in the classical typological sense (Sartori, 1970, 1984, 1991). As such, it has a conceptual core. However, the internal structure of the concept of accountability in terms of its subtypes (such as political, bureaucratic, legal, professional, financial, and societal accountability) requires a typological theory where differences have important methodological implications. There are implications not only for the study of different subtypes but also for the extent to which conclusions based on the study of one subtype can be extended beyond that domain.

In short, the argument in this paper is that while the various subtypes can be accommodated within one general definition, they each have an internal logic and separate domains

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[1]   Examples range from 'limited democracy' (Archer, 1995: 166), to 'restricted democracy' (Waisman, 1989: 69), 'protected democracy' (Loveman, 1994), and 'tutelary democracy' (Przeworski, 1986). Some scholars have argued that some labels are misleading since they are negations of democracy, for example Joseph's (1997: 367-8) 'virtual democracy'.

necessitating alternative empirical approaches to analysis. Hence, causal arguments based on studies of accountability on one level of analysis, using a particular type of concept, do not necessarily apply to other types and levels.

In an effort to facilitate an informed and somewhat more orderly and consistent usage of accountability, this paper ventures through a few familiar stages of concept formation. This paper thus first clarifies a few fundamentals about concept formation and comparison. The structure of the concept of accountability is then analysed and the implications in terms of appropriate empirical strategies and distinctions are drawn, based on the development of an exhaustive typology of the subtypes of accountability.

2   A clarification of terms, concepts, and phenomena

It may be advisable to begin with a few fundamentals in order to avoid misinterpretations of the following argument. In reference to what is sometimes called the semantic triangle, there is no necessary linkage between i) a particular term like 'accountability', ii) the conceptual construct of the beholder, and iii) the empirical phenomenon to which it refers. Present day post-positivists of various inclinations[2] build much of their critique of mainstream approaches on this realization.[3]

Second, if theory is always coloured by observation – and I believe it is – there is a critical relationship between theory and observation. Not every observation can support a theory and accordingly, not all theories are equally good. But any causal or descriptive theory must have empirical referents so that we can make observations. Theory should always be evaluated on its own terms, but without empirical implications it is simply not a theory; it is an untestable assumption at best, and a metaphysical belief at worst – except if it concerns theories in political philosophy (cf. King, Keohane and Verba, 1994). This is a stance informed by Popper's proposition that empirically falsifiable theories are the evidence of scholarship (Popper, 1953/1999: 57ff). Any concept is inherently *analytical* while concepts used in social science, according to this argument, must lend themselves towards empirical evaluation.[4] This is not to say that we can always observe the referents of a concept directly, of course, or that we should only be concerned with 'measurable but trivial' aspects of social reality.[5]

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[2]   For some particularly useful – though not unproblematic – critiques of positivism, see Bourdieu (1977), Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1967/1986), Flyvbjerg (2000), Garfinkel (1984), and Giddens (1982, 1984).

[3]   But Pierce (1931-58), Ogden and Richards (1923) and de Saussure (1915/1974) recognised it long ago and few modern positivists persist in assuming any kind of objective relationship between a term, the concept we have in mind and the phenomena we try to measure. Rather, as argued effectively by Sanders (2002: 54-63), modern mainstream social science scholars have found ways to adapt while retaining the strengths of the positivist tradition. For example, while our conceptualizations always condition our observations – thus, if we define 'swans' as white birds we will miss the black Asian variant of swans – the conclusion is that we need more precise and explicit specifications of concepts, not less. Hence, the indeterminate relationship between terminology, concepts and reality, and the 'softness' of certain phenomena that we wish to study, do not either make social scientific endeavour impossible, or force all of us to become concerned only with 'emic' meanings.

[4]   The discussion here moves between theory and concept as if these were interchangeable. This is not strictly so but the principles discussed are applicable to either. Concepts are important building blocks for theory, but many concepts are theoretically 'loaded' and sometimes even involve causal relationships, as in explanatory typologies. There is not room to go into that discussion here, however.

[5]   To take an example from the natural sciences, the concept of gravity (a concept that is a whole causal theory in itself, by the way) has empirical implications we can observe; but gravity itself cannot be observed. Similarly, in most instances we must do with less than perfect empirical referents and data (whether quantitative or qualitative) for evaluation of our theories in the social

2.1 Classic concept formation

Classic concept formation is hierarchical and aims for mutually exclusive definitions. It involves identifying the attributes that are co-jointly necessary and sufficient (in the descriptive sense, not to be confused with necessary and sufficient causal factors). In the logic of classical understanding of concepts therefore, *all* defining characteristics must be present in an object in order for it to be classified as an instance (Collier and Mahon, 1993; Coppedge, 2002, 2005; Munck, 2001; Sartori, 1984; Schedler, 2001). The defining characteristics are *necessary* minimum criteria that must be present in full; if one or more characteristics are missing, the object in question is simply classified as 'not belonging'. When all criteria are present, that is fully sufficient to make it an instance of the category.

Table 1: Classical category: apples

	Category	Attributes					
Superior:	Apples	A	B	C			
Sub-Types:	Red Apples	A	B	C	D		
	Green Apples	A	B	C		E	
	Yellow Apples	A	B	C			F

The organization of classical categories builds on what Sartori (e.g. 1984: 23) refers to as intension and extension: intension refers to defining characteristics while extension refers to objects to which it applies. It follows that the more and precise characteristics one attaches to a concept, the fewer the objects to which it will apply.[6] This is what some philosophers have held to be a 'law of inverse variation' (e.g. Angeles, 1981: 141). Hence, there is a hierarchy of concepts, such that red, green and yellow apples are categories of apples, which in turn belong to the class of fruits along with bananas, oranges and so on. Fruits are part of a superior category of foodstuffs and we can go on. Sartori (1970: 1040) refers to this as the 'ladder of abstraction' but in line with Collier and Mahon (1993: 846) I think it is better labelled 'ladder of generality': the further up the ladder the fewer defining characteristics (intension) and the larger number of objects referred to (extension).

2.2 Alternatives to conceptual 'stretching'

What is to be done when a concept such as accountability (that once upon a time had a commonly defined core set of characteristics) is applied in new contexts? Assuming we agree it is a classical concept,[7] and if scholars are concerned with conceptual integrity one should

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sciences in order to address non-trivial issues. This cannot be used as an excuse for advancing theories that are not testable in principle, however.

[6] This is not true in an absolute sense, however. The number of objects a concept refers to is a matter of empirical investigation, not analytical deduction (cf. Munck, 2004) but in practical terms the reasoning holds in virtually all cases and is therefore useful.

[7] In terms of the structure of concept formation, there are three principal and fundamentally different concepts: classical, radial, and family resemblance concepts. It could possibly be argued that accountability belongs to the radial conceptual group rather than the classical, but for the sake of simplicity and in order to prevent distraction from the main argument, that discussion is not pursued here. For a discussion of the different structures of concepts, see for example: Adcock (2005), Collier and Mahon (1993), Coppedge (2005), Goertz (2006), Lakoff (1987), Marsteintredet (2007), Munck (2001), Ostiguy (1993), Sartori (1984), and Schedler (2001).

follow Sartori's advice and move up the ladder of generality. The answer could be something like: accountability belongs to a class of concepts under the more general category of 'methods of limiting power' (others being, for example, devolution of power, violence, economic pressure, public shame, and anarchy). When a phenomenon in a new context does not squarely fit the definition of accountability, one moves up the ladder of generality to a superior category, thus avoiding conceptual stretching. To go back to the metaphor: red apples and oranges are not comparable as instances of apples, but they are comparable as instances of fruit.

Classical concept formation thus follows a neat and simple set of rules, not only for categorization but also for comparison. In deciding on what basis a set of cases should be compared, the defining characteristics are used for classification – not for explanation. The methodological implication should perhaps be obvious: apples cannot, or should not, be compared with regard to their 'appleness' as an explanation for why humans tend to favour one type over another. Classical concepts initially dichotomise, distinguishing between objects that clearly are, and those that are not 'A': a binary 0/1 which lends itself to standard small-*N* comparative methods, Boolean analysis, and maximum likelihood estimation techniques. Subtypes of classical concepts, however, can be more numerous and are all *complete* instances of the general category. Classical subtypes are therefore nominal categories (not more or less, just different) versions of the type in question. Religions, for example Islam and Christianity, are not more or less religions but nominally different instances, or subtypes. If we think of various kinds of accountability as subtypes in the classical sense, this applies to instances of various types of accountability (political, financial, legal, bureaucratic, and so on). None of them represent more or less accountability but different types of accountability.

Classical concepts allow for more flexibility than it may seem at first, although only if they are used with care and conscious crafting. What is sometimes forgotten is that while from the perspective of the superior concept these subtypes are only nominally different (i.e. they are not instances of more/less of for example accountability) they can nevertheless have other interesting qualities and/or effects that are matters of degree. Among full democracies, subtypes distinguished by electoral systems are known to have various effects such as higher levels of participation and women's legislative representation in countries using proportional representation (e.g. Lijphart, 1984, 1994, 1999; Lindberg, 2004, 2005; Norris, 2004). All are variants of full democracy.

Second, if one rather wishes to measure the impact of various 'levels of accountability' between systems, it is appropriate and fully legitimate to shift unit of analysis. This point about classical categorizations is sometimes missed in the literature (e.g. Marsteintredet, 2007: 3-5). Instead of using criteria for what accountability is to select the universe of cases, one picks a set defined by something else, e.g. local community political systems, relationships between courts and district assemblies, citizen-bureaucrat relationships in the land sector, or another topic. Level (and/or kind) of accountability can then be conceptualised as qualities that these units of analysis have to a greater or lesser degree (making them variables at ordinal or interval level). The point is that instead of restricting the universe of cases to objects that *are* instances of accountability relationships (when that is conceptualised as the unit of analysis), the universe of cases is defined by a different set of criteria which present a range of cases which have the *potential* to display certain qualities – in this case accountability relationships. Another possibility is to create a new concept and the social sciences are full of more or less useful and more or less unknown conceptual innovations.[8]

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[8] The danger is of course isolation and incommensurability with findings from earlier studies but when timely and useful it can launch important new research directions such as Hyden's (1992) suggestion to move from focusing on how the government rules (or fails to rule) to study how

The third solution, which is very common (and much disliked by Sartori and his followers), is to redefine the existing concept, by dropping some characteristics and sometimes adding others instead. Reading the now vast literature on accountability with various typologies covering virtually everything from policy networks in the international community (Grant and Keohane, 2005) to community governance of crime in some particular localities in Britain (Benyon and Edwards, 1999), this seems to be the dominant trend.[9] It produces a Byzantine complexity of conceptual innovation and variation that makes the serious political scientist inclined either to abandon the concept of accountability or to simply dismiss the bulk of the work based on it.

2.3   Layers of conceptual complexity

The above discussion applies *only* to aspects of concept formation which have to do with the internal structure of concepts, which should not be confused with other aspects. The internal structure is relatively uncontroversial and unproblematic for most concepts. For example, if we decide to study countries, legal courts, local governments, legislatures, political parties, or some other of the many other units of analysis in political science, the categorization of 'ins' and 'outs' is not often controversial. The same goes for many of the more specific qualities, or factors, that we may want to include: the number and categories of bills enacted by the legislature, participation measured as voter turnout, electoral systems, women's legislative representation, levels of education and wealth, and the list goes on. But a fair number of concepts are complex, multifaceted, multidimensional, and often contested. These tend also to be the 'big' concepts used for categorization such as democracy, civil society, legitimacy, and the concept of concern here: accountability. Hence, we need to pay sufficient attention to the identification of the core conceptual attributes of accountability *writ large* before developing a theory of its differentiation in terms of subtypes and discussing the methodological implications that follow.

3   The Fundamental Notion of Accountability

If potentially overlapping, multilayered, and multidimensional – what is this polysemantic concept of 'accountability'? The fact that a growing number of varied definitions is being used, in a literature ranging from ethnographic interpretations of idiosyncratic local meanings to highly technical financial auditing techniques, should perhaps caution us against even trying to find a common denominator.[10] It would anyway be impossible to discuss all the

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'governance' actually takes place, laying the foundation for the whole new paradigm of 'good governance'.

[9]   Another technique frequently used when one or two characteristics are missing for a class of objects, is to create 'diminished sub-types'. In the democratization literature this has been fairly standard, as mentioned above, and involves a danger of creating an ever larger set of diminished subtypes with unclear relationships. Strictly speaking, 'diminished' subtypes are not instances of the superior category. For example, accountability minus the right of the principal (e.g. the people) to sanction the agent (e.g. a politician, a chief, a family head) is a 'diminished subtype' but again is not really an instance of accountability since there is no *enforceable obligation* by the agent to be responsive to the principal (but more on this later). This, however, in effect means one is departing from classical concepts and moving into the land of family resemblance categorization. See more below.

[10]   See for example, Ackerman (2003), Anderson (2002), Baldwin (2007), Barton (2006), Browder (1975), Considine (2002), Crook and Manor (1998), Day and Klein (1987), Shor (1960), Finer (1941), Finn (1993), Fisse and Braithwaite (1993), Foweraker and Krznaric (2002), Goetz and Jenkins (2001, 2005), Hagiopan (2007), Hobolt and Klemmensen (2008), Hood et al. (1999), Hunhold (2001), Keefer (2007), Kelly (2003), Klijn and Koppenjan (1997), Knouse (1979), Mainwaring and Scully (1995), Mansbridge (1998), March and Olsen (1989), Marsh and Rhodes (1992), Maskin and Tirole (2004), McCubbins, Noll, and Weingast (1987), McKinney (1981),

attempts in the literature to define and operationalise accountability. Yet, a discussion of some of the meanings in current use can help us narrow down and identify core attributes of the root concept – whether or not we think it is classical in nature.[11]

3.1   Accountability, authority, and democracy

Bentham's principle – 'The more strictly we are watched, the better we behave' (quoted in Hood *et al.*, 1999) – perhaps best captures the idea behind the necessity of accountability. As Nietzsche recognised, we give an account only when it is requested, and only when that request is backed up by power (Butler, 2005: 11). This is the reason that accountability has for long been a key issue in constitutional scholarship (Smith and Hague, 1971: 38).

At a very fundamental level, then, accountability is closely associated with authority though not necessarily political authority. Puppets acting as extensions of someone else's will are not legitimately objects of accountability (even if puppets sometimes become scapegoats in practice). That is why accountability is different from 'responsiveness'. While a certain degree of responsiveness is often hailed as a desirable characteristic of leadership, in its extreme form it removes both leadership as such and any need for accountability mechanisms. Only actors with some discretion to make authoritative decisions can be the object of accountability relationships (e.g. Christiano, 1996: 219; Hyden, 1992: 14; Thomas 1998). In Burke's succinct statement on representative accountability: '*Your representative owes you not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion*' (1774, cited in Brevold and Ross, 1960: 148).

Accountability, hence, is associated with the act of discretionary governing, typically understood as the authoritative allocation of resources and exercising control and coordination (e.g. Dahl, 1971; Kooiman, 1993; Marsh and Rhodes, 1992; Rosenau and Czempiel, 1992). This in turn points toward the need for an identifiable locus of authority, as argued famously by J.S. Mill:

> 'Responsibility is null and void when nobody knows who is responsible. … there must be one person who receives the whole praise of what is well done, the whole blame of what is ill' (Mill, 1861/1964: 332).

This of course, does not negate the possibility that having overlapping layers of accountability relationships creates a stronger bulwark against undesirable use of authority, as argued by e.g. Day and Klein (1987), Finn (1993), Fisse and Braithwaite (1993), Romzek and Dubnick (1987), and Stone (1995). But it explains why accountability always has been central to democratic theory, to the extent that it is sometimes posited that democracy necessitates accountability.

What Locke captured in the statement that all men are, or ought to, be considered equal as political beings[12] (Locke 1689-90/1970, 322) and what Dahl calls the 'idea of intrinsic

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Moncrieffe (1998), Mulgan (2000, 2003), Normanton (1966), Norris (2004), O'Loughlin (1990), Oliver (1991), Olukoyun (2004), Painter-Morland (2006, 2007), Philips and Berman (2007), Radin and Romzek (1996), Rakner and Gloppen (2003), Rhodes (1986), Rose-Ackerman (1978), Rosenau (1992), Schmitter (2004), Shenkin and Coulson (2007), Smith and Hague (1971), Stirton and Lodge (2001), Stone (1995), Thomas (1998), Thynne and Goldring (1987), Tsai (2007), Walker (2002), Weber (1999), Woods and Narlikar (2001), Woods, (2001) and Wrede (2006).

[11]   See footnote 7 for approaches other than the 'classical' one.

[12]   At the time, of course, 'men' meant just free men, thereby excluding the vast majority of the population. Without any intention of downplaying its significance, this difference is a matter of citizenship and not democratic principle, hence, it is not central to the discussion here.

equality' (1989: 85) is the fundamental condition of rule by the people.[13] It is equal access to the decision-making process[14] rather than approval of the substantive decision by everyone, which satisfies the right to self-government (Ake, 2000). Yet, the etymological understanding of democracy leaves out the other side of the coin (Sartori, 1987: 30). Rule of the people is exercised *over* the very same people and to be workable any modern form of national democracy must be representative,[15] thus representation became grafted upon democracy (Hindess, 2000). This understanding of democracy induces a particular kind of vertical political accountability (Schedler, 1999), and with modern notions of democracy in larger more complex political systems, accountability has taken on a paramount significance (e.g. Moncrieffe, 1998; Schmitter and Karl, 1991).

Yet there are non-democratic as well as democratic types and mechanisms of accountability (cf. Grant and Keohane 2005); accountability as an idea pre-dates modern democracy and is wider in scope than 'democratic' accountability. For now, we thus have to stay on the more general level.

3.2   The core concept

At that general level, there seems to be a general agreement on four characteristics of all types of accountability. Unless I am mistaken, more or less all of the literature referred to in this paper agrees that the following should be included in the defining characteristics of any form of accountability:

1. An agent or institution who is to give an account (A for agent);
2. an area, responsibilities, or domain subject to accountability (D for domain);
3. an agent or institution to whom A is to give account (P for principal);
4. the right of P to require A to inform and explain/justify decisions with regard to D; and
5. the right of P to sanction A if A fails to inform and/or explain/justify decisions with regard to D.

These defining characteristics may be expressed in various ways[16] but seem to capture the core of the concept. It should be noted at the outset that none of these conditions specify that these relationships have to be formally codified or that the agents and institutions involved are formal institutions or hold an official office. Even if the individuals involved are indeed office holders such as bureaucrats in a state body, their accountability relationship may be in part or wholly informal. The director of operations in any given department may also be the informal patron of a number of employees who in turn as clients are given areas of responsibility. For example, a chief transport officer may be charged with making sure that the transport needs of the director's main rival who is also a Director competing with him or her for the slot as

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[13]   It is not within our scope here to go into depth on each of these related concepts. For a good discussion of the notion of how the 'people' can be conceived, see Dahl (1989: Ch. 9).

[14]   Political participation in the decision-making process may indeed take many forms in a democracy, ranging from localised and indulgent deliberations among friends to national and cross-national advocacy, and the selection of representatives for the execution of power. But in terms of democracy as a political system of national self-rule, it is the latter that is a necessary component and hence the focus here.

[15]   Even 'participatory' democracy as a formula for decision-making translates into a representative form as only the few can in practice lead, speak and contribute to mass meetings – or the meetings would be endless – whilst the many are confined to listen, evaluate and vote just as in a representative democracy proper (e.g. Dahl, 1989: 277). There are indeed other venues for participatory approaches to inclusion that can feed into a policy process before the decision-point but that renders participatory approaches a supplement, as opposed to an alternative, to representative democracy.

[16]   For a very similar reasoning, see Philip (2009).

deputy chief director, are never met. If and when the rival's transport works well, so that he or she can claim successes in his operations and thus threaten to overtake the Director in his or her quest for the higher office, the informal client will be called to justify and explain, and will possibly be sanctioned. In any case, the client will be monitored and evaluated and, if successful, rewarded.

Condition 1 and 2 together mean that an identifiable person or office must have some discretionary power over a certain domain, and that domain is subject to accountability. This neither implies that the agent or institution is elected or otherwise democratic, nor does it mean that the agent or institution is necessarily accountable for all of the domains it has discretionary decision-making power over. Condition 3 and 4 together mean that there is another agent or institution with a *de facto* right to require the agent or institution A to explain and justify decisions and actions with regard to the specified domain. Again, it is not assumed that P is elected or acting necessarily in the public interest (cf. Philip, 2009: 30). Another important thing to note at this stage is the wider applicability of this conceptualization to many others, in particular those that build on democratic principal-agent theory. Accountability is then usually thought of as P (the people) holding A (elected official) accountable for actions with respect to P itself. However, in many accountability relationships P is holding A accountable with respect to *x, y* or *z* denoted above as D. For example, ministers can hold top-level bureaucrats accountable for their decisions and actions with respect to lower-level bureaucrats, or other state agencies. In other words, it should not be assumed that those affected by decisions are necessarily the ones who have the right to hold the decision-maker(s) accountable.

Finally, condition 5 stipulates the crucial condition of the right of P to sanction A if the request to inform and/or explain and justify actions is not honoured to P's satisfaction. More restrictive definitions that exclude condition 5 are rare but Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000) in their conceptualization of 'societal accountability', for example, exclude any right to sanction agents and institutions. This effectively removes any obligation on decision-makers and actors to inform, justify and explain their actions beyond what they themselves are comfortable with, or feel obliged to disclose. This reduces the notion of accountability to meaning little if anything in terms of holding to account, since the decision-makers are holding themselves to account only as much as they like.

A few things regarding condition 5 should be noted. The right to sanction in its most general sense is limited to the right to punish a failure on the part of A to provide information and justification. Many definitions of accountability (e.g. Schedler, 1999) take this further to require that the right to sanction A's decisions and actions is part of the definition. But an important distinction should be made between the right to sanction A for failure to provide requested information and justifications for decisions and actions taken, and the right to sanction agents or institutions (A) for the content or effects of such decisions and actions. At its core, accountability necessitates only the right to sanction A for failure to provide information and justify decisions. The right of P to also sanction the content of decisions and actions by A, is a possibility that if present adds additional leverage for the P but is not strictly necessary for the concept of 'accountability'.

There are many examples of institutions of accountability that can illustrate this. Take the ombudsman office present in many contemporary democracies. It acts as a principal monitoring elected officials as well as bureaucracies and has the right to request that those agents to provide information about their decisions and actions as well as calling them to justify their actions. Ombudsman-offices typically do not have the right to sanction the agents for their actions as such but can use the courts to sanction offices if the requested information and/or justifications are not provided. Similarly, in many situations elected officials can demand bureaucrats to provide full information about their decisions and actions and to justify them, but as long as a holder of a bureaucratic office has not acted in direct

contravention of the formal rules and instructions, the elected official (the P in this case) is not allowed to sanction the bureaucrat with degradation, loss of office and so on.

The right to sanction failures by A also has another implication. There must exist a set of criteria for measuring accountable behaviour (cf. e.g. Knouse, 1979; Schedler, 1999). If there are no standards or measurable expectations of A with respect to A's duties in the domain (in terms of information, justification, and perhaps decisions and performance), there can be no accountability. If one has no clear picture of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable behaviour, it cannot be evaluated and sanctioned. This means, further, that there must be some form of evidence of accountable behavior.

Together these implications are crucial in drawing a line between instances of empirical phenomena which belong to accountability and those which do not. In private client-patron networks, for example, there are often only blurred or poorly defined expectations of behaviour on the part of the patron, whereas the client can be confronted with rather direct demands. The client's right to demand information and justification from the patron is sometimes very weak, or non-existent in these highly asymmetrical power relationships, and then it ceases to be an accountability relationship. If the client can request such information, there are often no or few means available to verify it, in which case the level of accountability is low. No one really knows what the patron does for the various individual clients other than the patron him/herself. Thus, even if the client or a set of clients regularly can extort some form of compensation, protection, or personal favours from the patron, that does not make such relationships instances of accountability.
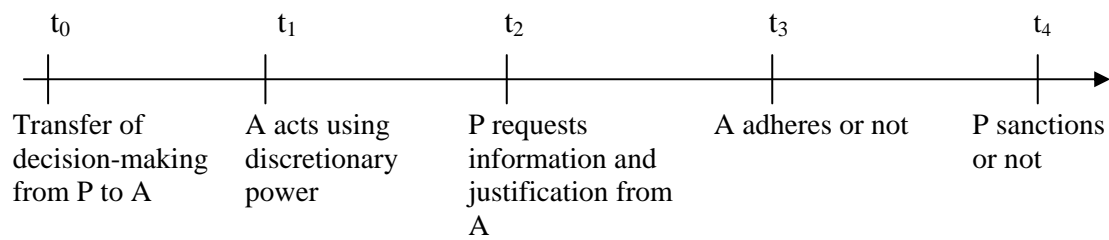
If and when the patron-client network is at least partly transposed into a more public form where the asymmetry of power is more level, for example when the patron becomes an elected official, the clients get principal-status as voters and can demand information as well as justification on explicitly stated standards such as promises made during election campaigns. There will also be more verifiable measures of behaviour such as to facilitate accountability. This example is not intended to mean that only elected officials can be held accountable, nor does it imply that informal relationships such as patron-clientelism can never involve accountability relationships. In any setting, with any set of actors, however, the five conditions and the implications discussed above with regard to measurable standards and verifiable information must be met to a sufficient degree.

I am acutely aware that this still leaves substantial room for interpretation in terms of what 'sufficient degree' means. I am not sure this can be resolved at this level of generality, however. What is sufficiently explicit and measurable in terms of duties of information and justification, and in terms of verifiable indicators, must probably be established in context-specific analyses of specific subtypes of accountability. It is the principle of the argument, however, that is important to keep in mind.

3.3   A stylised time-line

The five conditions also translate into a stylised time-line of accountability as depicted in Figure 1. Decision-making power over a particular D must first be transferred to A by P. A then acts in this capacity and P can thereafter require A to provide information and justification for these actions. If A fails to do so, P has the right to sanction A.

Figure 1: Time-Line of Accountability

t$_0$	t$_1$	t$_2$	t$_3$	t$_4$
Transfer of decision-making from P to A	A acts using discretionary power	P requests information and justification from A	A adheres or not	P sanctions or not

The foregoing elaborations, perhaps somewhat prolonged, have nevertheless been necessary to avoid misunderstandings along the way which might prevent a full understanding of the final argument.

4 Types of accountability

Formulations based on types of accountability use a variety of criteria to make analytical distinctions. However, it seems to me that the existing approaches, despite sometimes using various labels, can be organised along three dimensions.

A basic notion is the distinction between different *sources* of the accountability relationship. Is the accountability holder, or principal, internal or external to the one being held to account (e.g. Romzek and Dubnick, 1987; Radin and Romzek, 1996; Gormley and Balla, 2004)? For example, in a bureaucracy where superiors are holding subordinates accountable for their tasks the source is internal. In the relationship between voters and representative, the source is external to the legislature or executive being held to account.

But it is not only the source of accountability that is important. The *degree of control* which the principal exercises over the power holder is also important. It is probably preferable to keep our conceptual tools open to some extent to the possibility that the degree of control varies. That variation can be a source of explanation and interest in itself. Studies of voting and democracy have, for example, spent considerable energy on trying to find out exactly how much control voters in fact exercise over their representatives (e.g. Cox, 1997; Powell, 2000). Nevertheless, there are some fundamental differences between, say, financial auditing exercising extremely detailed control based on specific rules and regulations, and patron-client accountability, where control is typically diffuse and highly contextual.

The third critical dimension in distinguishing types of accountability relates to the *spatial direction* of the accountability relationship (cf. Schedler et al., 1999, among others). Shareholders exercise an upward form of vertical accountability when they hold business executives accountable for the company's performance. When politicians hold bureaucracies and their leaders accountable for the implementation of decisions they have taken, the accountability relationship runs downward in a vertical fashion. Finally, when the legislature engages in executive oversight or the constitutional court reviews acts adopted by the legislature, this is a form of accountability that runs horizontally 'among equals' (O'Donnell, 1998).

4.1 Typology and examples

Using these three dimensions as analytical distinctions, we end up with 12 different types of accountability relations as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2: Sub-types of accountability

Source of Control	Strength of Control	Vertical Upward	Vertical Downward	Horizontal
Internal	High	*Business*	*Bureaucratic*	*Audit*
	Low	*Client-Patron*	*Patron-Client*	*Peer Professional*
External	High	*Representative*	*Fiscal*	*Legal*
	Low	*Societal*	*Political*	*Reputational*

This table is an elaboration and synthesis of typologies found in Gormley and Balla (2004), Radin and Romzek (1996), Scott (2000), Smulovitz and Peruzzotti (2000), Grant and Keohane (2005), Mulgan (2003), and Schedler (1999).

Business accountability is characterised by a P that is part of the organization typically as shareholders, holding A (executives) to account for producing profit. The degree of control is high, with details of operations provided, and it runs vertically upward. The control is not necessarily detailed but in principle the P can require any form of information regarding the business. Sometimes business accountability serves as an inspiration for enhancing accountability in other spheres. It is often this type of accountability that serves as the model for various experiments with user-influence in efforts to expand local democracy and improve the quality of service delivery. But a user is not empowered in the same way as a shareholder and users also typically have a range of interests, whereas shareholders are joined by their vested interest in the successful operation of the company and in expanding profit. Hence, the business model of accountability, and studies thereof, cannot be transferred directly to other settings.

Bureaucratic accountability is also characterised by an internal P and high control, but runs downwards from top managers to lower levels. As long as it is a question of bureaucratic accountability (and not informal patron-clientelism) the object of accountability is following rules and regulations in carrying out the instructions regarding implementation decided upon at higher levels. Managers have the right to request any information regarding the operations of the bureaucracy from lower levels, but not from higher-ups. The fact that seniors can influence and often directly decide about juniors careers, promotion and conditions of work, according to the formal hierarchy of a bureaucratic organization, gives this form of accountability its special character.

Audit accountability is a particular sub-type of business or bureaucratic accountability in that it is horizontal rather than vertical. An internal P is holding other offices and office holders within the same state organization accountable, typically for financial accuracy and prudence. Again the level of control and ability to require very specific information is a defining feature but auditors cannot request just any kind of information but only such that lies within the formal purview of the audit.

In all organizations we can find informal forms of accountability relationships which run both upwards as in *client-patron accountability* and downwards as in *patron-client accountability*. Both are characterised by a low degree of control, with adjacent information scarcity and limited means of monitoring and evaluation. A client can request information and hold the patron accountable for delivery of the kind of benefits promised as part of the bargain but is usually limited to that. If the client is a more powerful broker as representative of an

important group of clients for example, or has a special favoured relationship with the patron, that client can often hold the patron accountable for certain issues outside of the direct exchange relationship. The exact dynamic typically revolves around the importance of the loyalty of the client to the patron since the main leverage for the client tends to come from threatening (implicitly or explicitly) to exit. The reverse is also true.

In the patron-client form of accountability, the patron can usually hold the client accountable for a wide range of things, given that what the patron can offer the client can be of substantial value, be it material rewards, personal safety, career opportunities, or improved status and fame. In poorer societies, material rewards and low-skill jobs are naturally more compelling for a client than in more economically developed countries. To buy client loyalty of poor people takes a lot less resources than paying off more affluent individuals. Add to that the informal norm that someone who helps to sustain your living is a 'father' to whom you must always be loyal (not uncommon in poor nations), and it becomes evident that the power of the patron to hold the client accountable can be strong. On the other hand, the patron's right and ability to require very specific information regarding all facets of the client's activities is fairly low compared to the subtypes of accountability discussed above. The individualised nature of patron-client forms of accountability and the absence of formal rules along with the exit option for clients seems to distinguish this form of accountability from other subtypes, to the extent that generalizations from studying clientelism are unlikely to be generalisable to other forms.

A sometimes formal (as in academic and professional organizations) and sometimes informal (as among peers and cohorts of professionals) form of horizontal accountability is *professional/peer accountability*. The degree of control is low since peers can only require rather unspecific information about very narrow segments of the activities of their colleagues. The P (the peers) are internal and accountability relationships are horizontal, focusing, like audits, on safe-guarding the organizational or occupational reputation. Among the factors that distinguish this subtype of accountability are the respect for colleagues and voluntary self-submission to being held accountable that come with professional peer reviewing. Academics evaluating each other's work and results, and lawyers' associations certifying and monitoring peers, are examples. Thus, the dynamic of this subtype of accountability is also not easily transferred to other spheres and findings from studies of peer professional accountability are unlikely to be useful for generalizations across to other subtypes.

Accountability relationships with external Ps are fundamentally different. *Representational accountability* in democratic political systems puts the citizens as P and their elected representatives as A in a vertical relationship running upwards. The degree of control is relatively high. Several forms of participation are available to citizens for the purposes of requiring information and holding elected leaders accountable. Voting is one such activity that can have dramatic consequences for representatives but it is non-continuous and in between electoral periods other means are more effective. Calls, meetings, demonstrations, letters, emails, writing to newspapers, and mobilization of community and action-groups are just some of them.

The nature of elected office gives citizens a powerful position and they can require specific and detailed information about a broad range of issues covered in political activity, including often the private affairs of the representatives. Yet, in modern states with large citizenries, a rather large-scale collective action is often required to exercise effective accountability, not the least when using the tool of voting. Thus special collective action problems frequently affect the P's ability to use the formal rights of requesting information and holding elected representatives accountable. These distinguish this form of accountability from many of the other subtypes.

In addition, the formal rules and set-up of political institutions differ in ways which impact on accountability relationships. First-past-the-post electoral rules in single-member districts, for example, facilitate a closer and more direct accountability relationship between citizens and their representative to the national legislature but effectively also undermine the viability of using elections to demand new policy by voting for new or smaller parties. These are just illustrations to exemplify that generalizations regarding both the causes and the effects of representational accountability are unlikely to travel well to other subtypes. Comparisons between findings from studies of representational accountability and other subtypes are probably not, therefore, going to form a sound basis for higher-order theory.

Fiscal and Legal accountability respectively can be both vertical downward and horizontal. In both cases the degree of control is typically high and very detailed. When fiscal accountability runs vertically downward an external P such as a legislature holds various ministries, departments, and agencies (MDAs) fiscally accountable. Another case is when a state bureaucracy holds an implementing agency such as a non-profit business fiscally accountable. But when the legislature holds the executive accountable for fiscal prudence and budgetary constraints, the relationship is horizontal rather than vertical. The ministry of finance can also hold other ministries fiscally accountable and again the relationship is horizontal. We find a similar situation with regard to legal accountability. Most instances of legal accountability run vertically downward. Various judicial institutions, being the external P, hold citizens, businesses, politicians and others accountable for lawful behaviour. But when judicial institutions hold other state institutions accountable such as when a constitutional court, or in some countries supreme court judges, investigate the lawfulness of executive decisions and acts by the legislature, the accountability relationship is horizontal.

An external P does not always go hand in hand with a high degree of control, however. *Societal accountability* is involved where civil society and the media Take actions aimed at forcing political, bureaucratic, business and legal decision-makers to give information on, and justifications for, their actions. The strength of control is typically relatively weak in these cases but also varies with contextual factors such as legislation (e.g. whether there is a freedom of information act or not). It is distinguished from representational accountability in that the Ps are more or less 'self-appointed' in their role and first have to convince the As and the surrounding society of this arrangement. It is therefore tenuous and circumscribed by the fact that the 'right' of the P to hold the A accountable is in the end based on voluntary action and the degree of control is therefore low and rather diffuse.

Political accountability is the vertical-downward variant of external accountability with relatively weak control. Politicians' degree of control over MDAs is by its very nature relatively weak. Bureaucracies are large and handle thousands of issues every day, while politicians are few and have several competing priorities as well as severe time and cognitive constraints. In consequence, there are only a very limited number of bureaucratic decisions and processes which politicians can attend to in any detail, giving the bureaucracy significant discretionary powers.

Reputational accountability's most significant expression runs horizontally among peers or peer institutions which are external to the agent. It is another form of diffuse and even indirect accountability whereby the agent's reputation among other equals can be damaged if s/he is deemed to act in contradiction with established norms and procedures. It is highly dependent on informal norms amongst participants, both agents and principals, and thus even within this category the causes and effects of successful accountability are likely to vary significantly.

4.2   Accountability and responsiveness

Before concluding, a final note is important. Responsiveness is often proclaimed to be one of the key aspects of accountability (e.g. Schedler, 1999; Walker, 2002; Kelly, 2003; Barton, 2006). There is a crucial difference here between the two types of vertical accountability. In vertical-upward forms of accountability this is exactly the point. Share-holders, clients, citizens, and societal organizations are the P's who, after delegating decision-making power and discretion to agents such as executive, patrons, and politicians, monitor their behaviour and hold them to account for their failure or success to provide information and justifications for their decisions (and sometimes the outcomes of those decisions as well). If dissatisfied, the P's can sanction the A's by way of 'throwing the rascals out' or simply expose the A's actions and failures. The sought-after effect is to make agents responsive to the wishes and interests of the principals.

Vertical-downward is in principle very different. In these cases, the P (who transfers power to the agent) is not directly involved in the accountability relationship. Instead it is the A who in turn holds an implementing agent (I) accountable for its actions toward P, or even a principal behind P. For example, a president (P) appoints and transfers decision-making power to the head of an agency (A) who holds the bureaucracy of that agency (I) accountable for carrying out directives towards citizens (principals behind P) who elected the president (P). In this case, you may argue that the ultimate principal is the citizens, but even if we limit ourselves to considering the president as the P, the triangular relationship has consequences. The I is held accountable by A but is supposed to be mainly responsive to P (or even the principal behind P, i.e. the citizens) and must still act within the law and bureaucratic regulations. This means that lower-level bureaucrats are in fact not supposed to be responsive to A or P if and when A's or P's directives go against either bureaucratic rules or the law.

This is particularly evident in the case of legal accountability. The highest ranking judges are typically appointed by the executive and/or legislature with the mission to uphold the law. In a democratic system it is reasonable to argue that citizens are the ultimate P who elects the politicians who in turn appoint judges. In exercising their mandate, however, judges are not supposed to be responsive to either politicians or citizens. Indeed, they are expected to do the exact opposite: to exercise their decision-making power independently of the interests and wishes of various Ps in the interest of the rule of law. Judicial institutions generally are held accountable for being non-responsive.

Similarly, vertical accountability in the form of periodic voting may, for example, be a blunt instrument of policy-specific accountability since voters typically can only chose between a few alternatives that represent complex mixes of a number of policies, from defence to child care. But vertical accountability exercised in the form of frequent interactions between the legislator elected in single-member constituencies and constituents can be very effective in achieving policy-specific responsiveness (cf. Goetz and Jenkins 2005). In short, responsiveness may be the desired *outcome* of some types of accountability but far from all, and should not be understood as integral to accountability itself.

5   Concluding on a cautionary note: empirical analysis and generalization

Where does all this leave us? A key argument of this paper is that accountability as an analytical concept can be saved despite the current state of conceptual stretching and Byzantine confusion. The way to save the concept and its usefulness for empirical analysis is to follow the classic approach to concept formation. In this approach, five key characteristics denote the conceptual core of accountability: 1) An agent or institution who is to give an account (A for agent); 2) an area, responsibilities, or domain subject to accountability (D for

domain); 3) an agent or institution to whom A is to give account (P for principal); 4) the right of P to require A to inform and explain/justify decisions with regard to D; and 5) the right of P to sanction A if A fails to inform and/or explain/justify decisions with regard to D.

Beyond these five characteristics, this paper argues that there are three additional characteristics which can take on two values each (absence or presence), and these generate twelve subtypes or categories of accountability (Table 2). Each subtype occupies its distinct conceptual terrain denoting specific empirical phenomena. We have seen that the differing characteristics of these twelve subtypes lead to difficulties in making generalizations above the level of subtypes with regard to causes and effects.

In addition, it should be noted that most accountability theories assume linear cause-effect relationships, as well as rational and informed decision-making aimed at producing collective goods. These are not viable empirical assumptions. Moreover, as the conceptual theory above reveals, they are not theoretically consistent where the object of accountability may have as its primary focus the maximization of non-objective functions such as the maintenance of relationships and loyalties (cf. Philips and Berman, 2007). There is a second reason why effective accountability should not be assumed to have only positive or desired outcomes. The incentives for agents to be responsive to principals as a consequence of effective accountability relationships can also lead to agents taking actions and decisions that are easily 'sold' or popular, rather than doing what is right or necessary (Maskin and Tirole, 2004: 1035). In the extreme, agents may undermine the functioning of a society's economy and the rights of minorities and other groups.

This is also the time for a cautionary note on the extent to which empirical analysis can lead us towards comparative generalizations. There are several important implications for empirical research on accountability implied in the reasoning above and it is time to make them more explicit, along with some additional complications of a more general sort.

First, we cannot scale or even rank order the various types of accountability. The differences amongst them are nominal and it makes no sense to use qualitative or quantitative techniques designed for scale or ordinal variables in analysing outcomes comparatively across sub-types.

Second, each type of accountability has its designated functions and is compatible with certain situations only; no one is a panacea for all kind of problems of restraining power. Besides the logical reasoning in this paper, contextual factors naturally play a role in this but it remains important to recognise the different nature of the problems which various types are suited to address. Legal accountability is designed to insulate agents from influences and from pressures to be responsive to principals for example, while bureaucratic accountability is more suited to detailed and very direct responsiveness by subordinates. Representative accountability allows for broad mandates allowing sufficient (yes, sometimes excessive) discretion to agents to deal with unforeseen and complex matters according to their judgment. An empirical analysis that mistakes different types of accountability for more or less accountability, is unlikely to be very helpful.

Third, within each of the subtypes of accountability, one can find many variations in levels. It is possible to construct measures of levels (ordinal or scale, qualitative or quantitative) for each of these types. Yet it remains crucial not to assume that a measurement instrument, criterion, or approach used for one type of accountability is necessarily very useful for gauging levels of accountability in another type. We need to develop separate measurement schemes and instruments for each type.

Fourth, for the reasons given, one has to be very cautious in terms of making generalizations and transposing causal inferences from the study of one subtype of accountability to another. As long as the causal inference involves defining characteristics with varying values, the

inference can only be generalised to other subtypes with the same defining 'profile'. In most cases, the unique profile of a subtype is derived from the characteristics relevant to the causal inference; hence, results cannot be generalised to other subtypes without appropriate testing. However, there is a further problem which applies to the aggregation of findings even within one subtype.

As long as one's ontology with regards to causation stays within the typical statistical worldview (i.e. assuming unit homogeneity, symmetric and linear causation, and independent effect of individual factors), studies of the same subtype of accountability can be compared across contexts and generalizations be drawn from an accumulated set of results. However, many contemporary theories about politics theorize rather more complex and varied models of causation where equifinality, multifinality, multiple conjectural causal models, path dependencies, increasing returns, and diffusion figure prominently (cf. Brady and Collier eds. 2004; Gerring, 2001; George and Bennett, 2005; Hall, 2003; Mahoney and Goertz, 2006; Ragin, 1987). When trying to serve the aim of accumulation of knowledge, efforts at combining results from such studies to create more general statements about either the causes of, or the effects of one particular subtype of accountability seem to be inherently implausible, or at least very much more difficult.

A path dependency argument, for example, negates the independent effect of individual factors as well as the causal ontology of multiple conjunctural causation insofar as the latter approach models factors identified with a particular outcome as current and historically independent (Pierson, 2000). Therefore, even if studies are carried out on the *same* subtype of accountability but are based on different causal ontologies, the results will again not be a sound basis for comparative generalizations.

Finally, empirical reality also has a way of making things complicated. In most societies and political systems, various accountability relationships have been established at various points in time with the effect that even single institutions have multiple layers of various types of accountability. This makes it hard to discern and then disentangle when and where a particular type of accountability relationship is engaged, and to establish the level of accountability produced. That it is not easy does not justify not doing it, however, since the alternative is fraught with risks of systematic measurement errors (conflating the presence of one type of accountability with zero accountability for example) which may undermine the validity of the analysis.

In a more practical sense, it stands to reason to believe that the problems and prospects of accountability differ. What is required for a society to imbibe a general culture of expectations of accountability from the state and its political institutions is one thing; the specific issues relating to vertical political accountability between citizens and representatives are another; how horizontal political accountability in terms of the legislators' providing effective oversight of the executive works a third; what factors and incentives make for effective vertical bureaucratic accountability a fourth question, and so on. It cannot be assumed that what works in one area will also work in another.

There may even be causal relationships among these issues, such as the prevalent logic of vertical political accountability (exercised through voting and other means), which can impact on how much horizontal political accountability is provided in a particular political system. If, for example, vertical political accountability is centred on local and perhaps even personal issues, there are few incentives for legislators to invest time and resources in the provision of executive oversight. Conversely, an electorate putting a high premium on a clean and well-monitored executive will impact positively on horizontal accountability. Such a situation in which both vertical and horizontal political accountability have different goals is in turn likely to impact on the nature and level of bureaucratic accountability. In short, it is vital to be aware

of the full range of possibilities so as to be clear when it comes to research design and analysis.

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